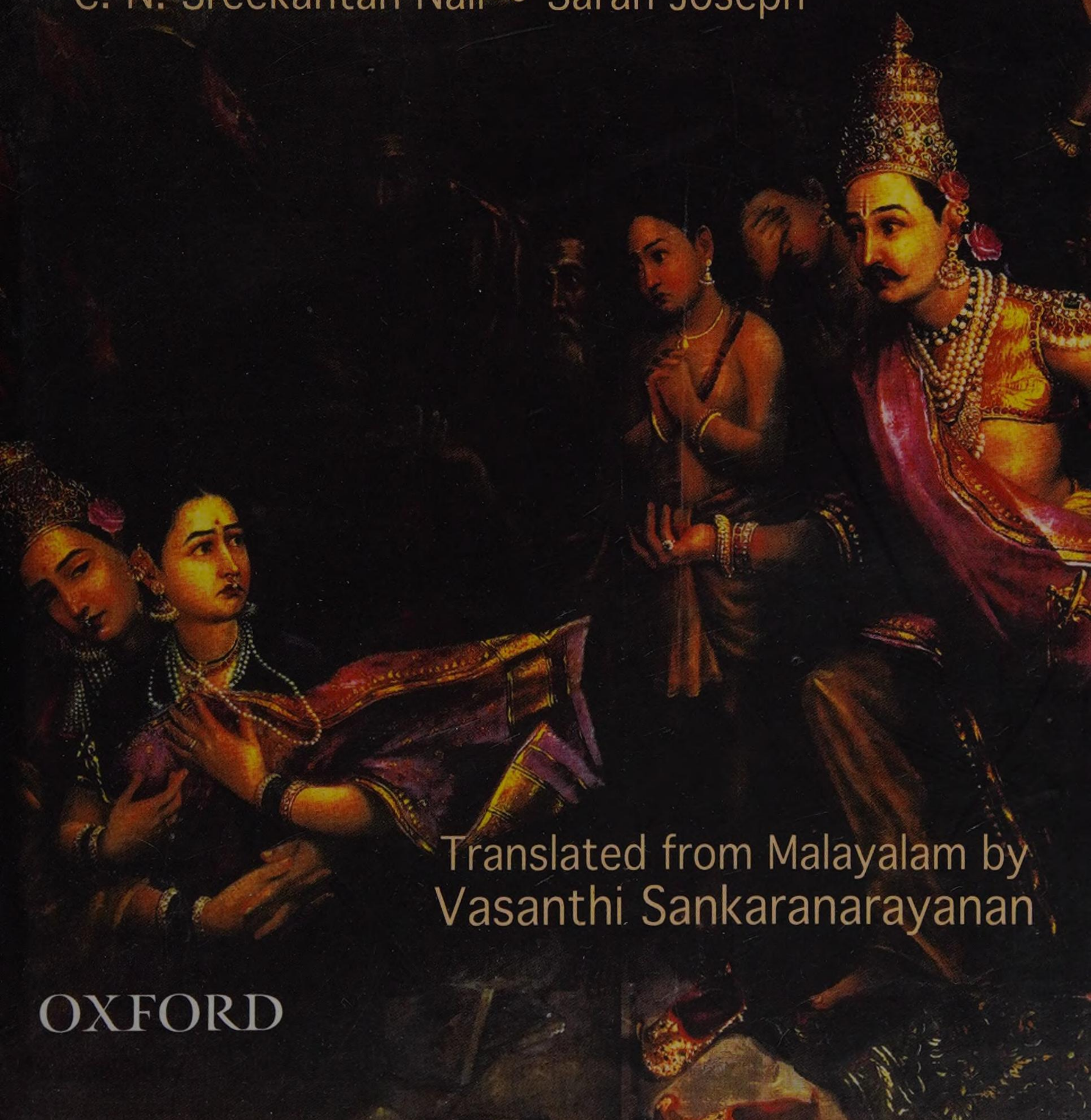
Retelling the RAMAYANA

Voices from Kerala

C. N. Sreekantan Nair • Sarah Joseph



Translated from Malayalam by
Vasanthi Sankaranarayanan

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RETELLING THE RAMAYANA

Voices from Kerala

More than any other sacred text, the Ramayana has been interpreted as a blueprint for right human action. Of the innumerable Ramayanas composed, the most prestigious is Valmiki's text.

Across several cultures though, refashioning and retelling Valmiki's influential and patriarchal epic has become a way of literary dissent in the grand tradition of Indian self-questioning.

Two such voices from Kerala, included here, showcase the sophisticated cultural diversity of the region. C.N. Sreekantan Nair's play, ***Kanchana Sita*** (1961), is about the tragedy of power, and the sacrifices that adherence to dharma demands, including abandoning a chaste wife.

Sarah Joseph's ***Ramayana Stories*** (1990s) are feminist critiques of traditional narratives of women humiliated and torn apart—both psychologically and physically—by ambitious men. Joseph's style is layered and poetic, deep and intense. Both Nair and Joseph bring out the political aspects of these stories through the dialectics between victor and vanquished, man and woman, tribal and city dweller, Aryan and Dravidian.

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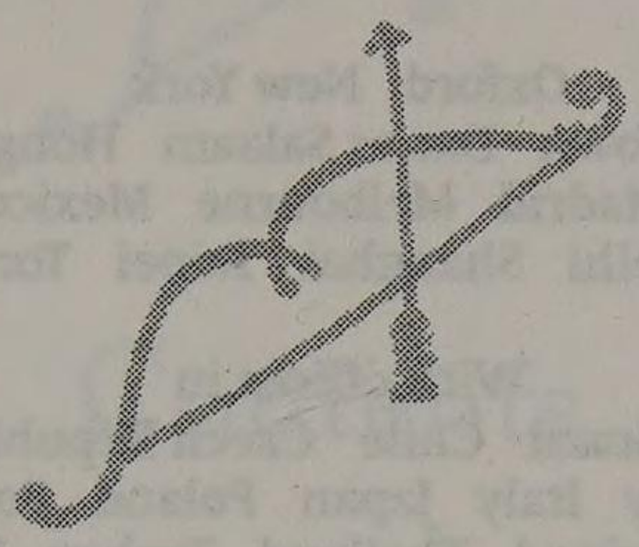

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UNIVERSITY PRESS

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YMCA Library Building, Jai Singh Road, New Delhi 110 001

Oxford University Press is a department of the University of Oxford.
It furthers the University's objective of excellence in research, scholarship,
and education by publishing worldwide in

Oxford New York
Auckland Cape Town Dar es Salaam Hong Kong Karachi
Kuala Lumpur Madrid Melbourne Mexico City Nairobi
New Delhi Shanghai Taipei Toronto

With offices in
Argentina Austria Brazil Chile Czech Republic France Greece
Guatemala Hungary Italy Japan Poland Portugal Singapore
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Published in India
by Oxford University Press, New Delhi

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First published 2005

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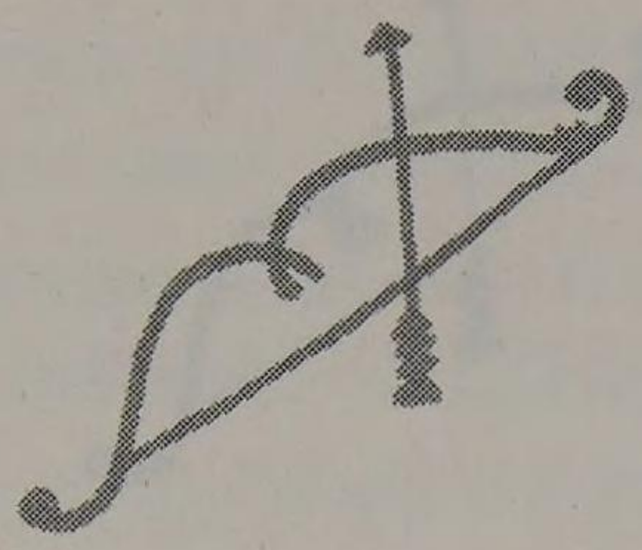
ISBN-13: 978-0-19-566623-6
ISBN-10: 0-19-566623-2

MR. Omayal Achi MR. Arunachalam Trust was set up in 1976 to further education and health care particularly in rural areas. The MR. AR. Educational Society was later established by the Trust. One of the Society's activities is to sponsor Indian literature. This translation is entirely funded by the MR. AR. Educational Society as part of its aims.

Typeset in Spectrum 12/14.5
by Eleven Arts, Keshav Puram, Delhi 110 035
Printed in India by Roopak Printers, New Delhi 110 032
Published by Manzar Khan, Oxford University Press
YMCA Library Building, Jai Singh Road, New Delhi 110 001



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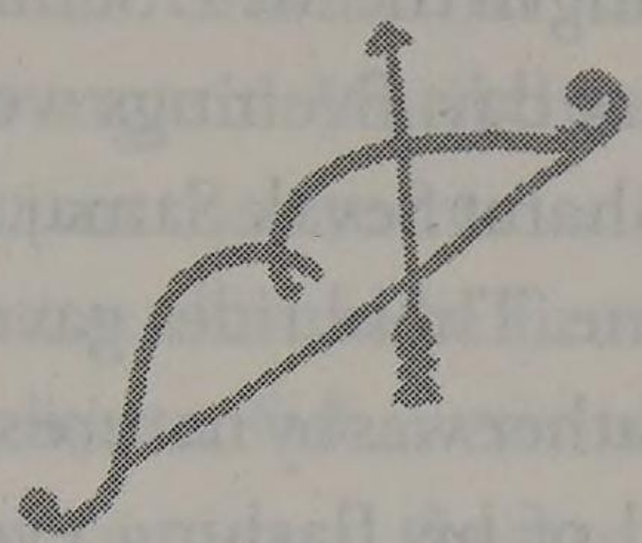


Remembering my Father

Twenty-seven years have passed since my father's death. These long years should have diminished the sorrow of separation, no matter the intensity of the bond. But, as the pain of that loss has not diminished at all, I realize the influence of that dazzling personality on me.

My father was with me for only eighteen years. Viewed superficially, it would seem that I had not been with him long enough to develop a close bond. But my experience is just the opposite. I drew closer to him during the last five or six years. Most of my childhood was spent in Kottayam. After he left the *Kaumudi* magazine, father came to Kottayam as the editor of *Desabandhu* weekly. Within a short time *Desabandhu* metamorphosed into the cultural star of Kerala. It was then that he joined the Public Relations Department of Kerala as the District Information Officer. After three years, he resigned perhaps because he realized that the persona of a government servant did not suit him.

During those years, I didn't see much of Father at home. Even if I had, I would not have been able to get close to him, as he was not a person who petted children excessively. As I recall, we had a Morris Minor car. At the time Father was working for *Kerala Bhushanam*

weekly, and I was studying in the M. T. Seminary School. He would drive me to school every day. Evenings would find me waiting in the adjacent office of Bharat Sevak Samaj. Father would fetch me and drive me back home. Those rides gave me the confidence to open up with him. My father was by nature serious and preoccupied. My friends were afraid of his flashing eyes and unusually large moustache. They came home stealthily and only after ascertaining that he was not in. My father's stern manner did not bother my younger sister Ambika. I watched with some envy as she climbed on to his lap. She was both casual and adamant with him. It was through her that I let Father know about my small needs. Even though father never raised his hand to us, that deliberate, nailing stare was worse than a beating. There was one thing he was very particular about. On no account were we to tell lies. He could not tolerate even an insignificant lie.

By the time I was in the fifth standard all my friends shifted to the English medium system. But Father did not allow me to shift with them. I was very upset. When my mother approached father supporting my case, he told me, that only after mastering one's own mother tongue, should one attempt to learn a foreign language. 'Do not worry. I shall give you some elementary books in English. Read them carefully. Then you will be able to handle that language better than people who are studying in that medium of instruction.'

Along with this advice I was given permission to attend the daily evening meetings he held at home. On the evenings when Father was at home, he entertained at least five or six people. It was something of an assembly.Talks and discussions went on till midnight. Ignoring my mother's threats about neglecting my lessons, I would linger, a small performer in those assemblies. Sometimes, there were guests from distant places. There were many friends who stayed on for one or two days. M. Govindan, M.V. Devan, P.K. Venukuttan Nair, Katammanitta Ramakrishnan, Ayyappa Paniker, and V.S. Sharma were some of them.

It was during that time that Father started a little theatre movement called 'Navarangam'. Until that time, the Malayalam theatre imitated the western theatre modes. As a result of the vision that our theatre presentation should be firmly entrenched in our own performance-art traditions, father evolved a mental concept of 'Tanatu Nataka Vedi' (one's personal theatre). It was 'Navarangam' which started the informal reading of plays which was till then unfamiliar to the Malayali. At that time a group of magnanimous young men and women from Kottayam began their intense involvement in this new theatre movement. Father was also the chief editor of the daily edition of *Keralabhushanam*. The editorial of *Keralabhushanam* caught the attention of the whole of Kerala. The evening meetings gave me a great deal of new insights. Literary people, painters, industrialists, and medical doctors all used to attend those meetings when everything under the sun was discussed. The insights I gained into serious subjects even at that young age, were a great treasure.

During that time, Sophocles' play on Oedipus (C.J. Thomas' translation) was staged in Kottayam under Father's direction. In that play, I got a chance to act as the young boy who guides the blind philosopher, Thoratius. Father played Creon. Thus, I had the great fortune of acting in a play with Father. Father believed that the scripting, and the other essential aspects of presentation such as acting, costumes, stage sets, light, direction should be learnt in a disciplined manner and internalized. The first 'Natakakalari' (the training programme for theatre) in Sasthamkotta evolved from this belief as did the method of choosing young people who treated theatre as a serious occupation, giving them a ten-day residential training. After that similar 'Natakakalaris' were held in other places such as Kuthattukulam.

Father's political activities began at an early age. He was elected president of the All Travancore Students Congress in 1947. In the very next year he was chosen as the president of the All India

Students Congress. Later, though he became an active worker of RSP (Rashtriya Socialist Party), by the year 1960 he retired completely from politics. He began his literary life by writing short stories. Even though he was a renowned short-story writer, within a short time he realized that plays were his sphere and surrendered his body and mind to that discipline. From his conviction that instead of imitating the western theatre methods it was necessary to bring about a theatre presentation which was specific to Kerala, the concept of 'Tanatunatakavedi' (one's personal theatre) took shape. Father's play *Kali* was the child of that strain of thought.

It was during the time of writing the famous social plays such as *Nashtakkachavatam* (An Unprofitable Business) that *Kanchana Sita* (A Golden Sita), which invokes the tender and emotionally moving moments in Ramayanam was created. He says in the introduction to *Kanchana Sita:* 'I think that the theme of *Kanchana Sita* is neither old nor new. It is the story of a human being caught in a special bondage from the start of social structures. I too hope that this bondage will be broken tomorrow. But, are we not seeing that bondage strengthening?' When he wrote *Kanchana Sita* (1958; first performed in 1958) he had not planned a trilogy. After writing *Saketam* (1965; first performed in 1969) the idea of a trilogy must have taken complete shape. So was born *Lankalakshmi* (1976; first performed in 1975).

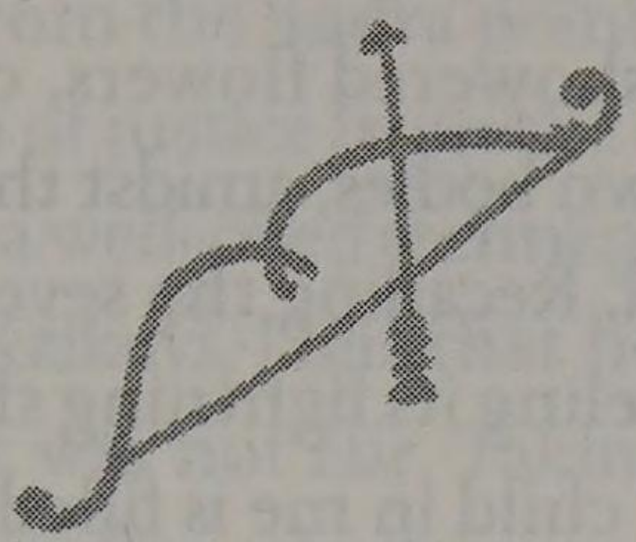
The foremost idea in *Kanchana Sita* is politics, in *Saketam* it is psychology, and in *Lankalakshmi*, philosophy. All three works unveil human tragedy. These plays are the stories of the consciousness of curse and sin by Raman, Ravanan, and Dasarathan hunted as they are, by tragic events. *Lankalakshmi* was written in 1974. Father was under the great pressure of severe mental conflicts. On the one side was the difficulty of portraying the multifaceted, universal personality of Ravanan, on the other, Father's many personal problems. He completed writing *Lankalakshmi* in Palghat. The image of my father, drained of all energy and life on his return from Palghat is fresh in

my mind even now. *Lankalakshmi* is a play for which the playwright sacrificed himself. After a few days he was admitted in hospital, a very sick man. The next two years, he spent between the hospital and home. When he left us forever on 17 December 1976, a great many of his dreams remained unfulfilled.

Father died at the age of forty-eight having accomplished the work of a lifetime. Political worker, newspaper editor, short-story writer, eloquent speaker, organizer, actor, playwright, theatre activist—were the many different roles he assumed during a very short time! I am not capable of talking in depth or measuring Father's service to literature. I still doubt whether he received the acknowledgement and respect due to him. Maybe, the years to come will bring that due. Father will always remain someone of whom we are proud. We have been able to confront and overcome all obstacles in life, because of his gentle and glowing consciousness and his presence so rooted in our minds.

C. N. UNNIKRISHNAN

(Translated by Vasanthi Sankaranarayanan)



Author's Note

It seems to me that the image imprinted in children's minds is one of 'Raman' soaked in a 'rain of flowers' from heaven. The *devas* shower flowers upon the head of Raman, who, upon slaying and extinguishing the *rakshasas*, stands upright. The children are reassured at that moment that peace prevails everywhere.

All the versions of Ramayanam that children hear and read were filled with cruel rakhasas and *rakshasis*. They had been obstructing *yagas*, and attacking hermits. I continue to read and study that Raman killing them has become even a child's need. The death of every rakshasa is marked by devas showering flowers. Children love flowers. The innocent children desire the noiseless, painless showering of flowers (which trickle like honey on their heads) to a shower of arrows, the rivers of blood, and the jingling of weapons.

As they grow up, some children may read and believe that the killing of the rakshasas signifies the victory or defeat at the end of clan conflicts. That is the kind of reading that I also did. My reading is that all killings of rakshasas need not end in a 'victory' of human/divine beings.

Damp, with a rain of flowers, Raman captured a place in the early spaces of my memory. After 'the storm of arrows', after the

complete annihilation, after the murder of friends as well as foes, and bloodshed, devas showered flowers, over the severed heads, over the torn and strewn bodies, amidst the heart-rending cries of pain. On Raman's head. Recalling the severe pain when a body is pierced with arrows, feeling its lightning shaft of pain as it spreads through my spine, the child in me is filled with restless anxiety.

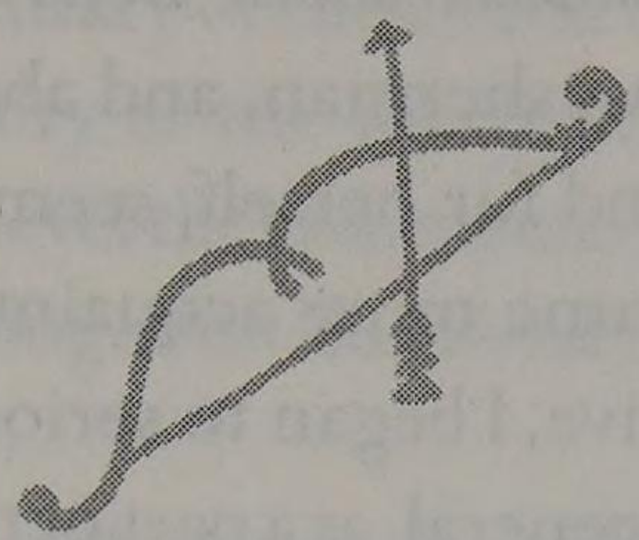
All the flowers showered do not reach their mark. It seems to me that in the killing of Ravanan, at least from Sita's point of view, Raman is not the one who emerged victorious. To Sita, the 'victorious Raman' can never be he who 'for the sake of people's welfare' was prepared to abandon her in Lanka. In that moment, when she realized that where 'love' should have won, 'power' had, she requests Lakshmanan to prepare a 'fire' for her. As living women jumped onto a pyre to observe a custom in connection with the husband's death, for Sita the death of love meant the death of Raman. When it came to 'A Thoughtful Sita' (a poem in Malayalam by Kumaran Asan), I was convinced about this point. The victorious Raman was actually the defeated one. Whatever anyone says, this defeat was pasted in Raman's heart like burning embers scorching him every moment and hunting him till his very end. Who were those that Raman tried to convince by filling the space that belonged to a living Sita with an insignificant 'Golden Sita'? I felt that only a sorrowful relationship is possible between the individual and authoritarian power politics. I observed that while Raman was creating a 'Rama Rajya' he could only imagine a weak concept of love which could reject Sita at any moment. When the question, whether love or power is more important is posed, my prayer which would go beyond time is that Sita's choice should be Raman. I see Sita and Surpanakha as two aspects of the loss of love in 'Rama Rajya'.

It was when I reached *Uttararamayanam* I felt, not only from the point of view of love, that this kind of a reading was possible. In order to revive the 'life' of the dead brahmin boy the aged, well-respected and noble Sudra sage, Sambooka was killed. This provoked

me to read Rama Rajya from the Sudra point of view. The 'Killing of Bali' poses the question of justice from the animal point of view. When Manthara tried out a well-oiled technique of political practice to solidify the justice of Kaikeyi, I felt that her being reduced to a petty, jealous, hunchback was not fair. Taking the side of nature, wantonly destroyed by wars, Sita asks Raman, 'Why do you carry so many deadly weapons while walking through this beautiful forest where one does not have to be afraid of enemies?'

Oh, certainly! All children have doubts. When the 'laws and justice' that prevailed centuries ago do not coalesce with modern practices of justice, children feel confused. Only for a short span of time can we fool children offering lessons and prayers with the use of force. Truly, it is from the doubts arising from a deeply pained self that my 'Ramayana Stories' were born.

SARA JOSEPH



Translator's Note

The story of the Ramayanam, one of the two great epics of India, is familiar to most Indians. For people of my generation, it was a story taught to children at a very young age. We saw it as a romantic love story, one in which good won over evil and the central character, Raman, was a role model. We were more familiar with the regional versions of the Ramayanam than the original Sanskrit version of Valmiki.

The Ramayanam, as told to us, was definitely 'Raman's story'. Raman was the evergreen hero, the great archer, the young man who gave up being crowned and went to the forest to fulfil the oath his father gave to his second wife, Kaikeyi. He was also quoted as a great lover, a man who stood steadfast by a single wife and a loving brother. In short, he was the ideal man, a man whom every boy aimed to imitate and every girl hoped to meet when she grew up.

This myth had its own charm for me in my adolescence and youth even though I questioned some of Raman's actions like the covert killing of Bali and the unreasonable demand made of Sita to prove her chastity by jumping into the fire. I do not remember exactly when I became disenchanted with the myth of the ideal man. But, it did happen. It must have been when I became acquainted

with the story of *Uttararamacharitam*. Believing the aspersions cast on her character by a washerman, and abandoning the pregnant Sita in the forest to fend for herself, seemed to me a very harsh act. Later, when I became more acquainted with feminism and the women's perspective, I began to seriously question the story of the Ramayanam in general, as a part of the patriarchal literature of ancient India and, in particular, the construction of the character of Raman and the ideals he stood for.

When I read Sarah Joseph's four stories based on episodes from the Ramayanam—'Asoka', 'Black Holes', 'Mother Clan', and 'What is not in the Story'—I was moved not only by her style of narration, but by her desire to have a deeper look into certain episodes of the Ramayanam, which resulted in its reinterpretation. While readers and academics have read these stories from different collections of short stories by Joseph, and many have made some critical comments on them, I think this is the first time an attempt is being made to publish them all in one volume under the heading 'Ramayana Stories'. I would like to call these stories Joseph's commentaries on the Ramayanam.

In selecting different episodes from the Ramayanam and not treating it as a continuous story, she diffuses the emphasis on Raman the hero and focuses on certain characters, especially women characters, who have been marginalized and not given enough attention and importance in the original. Sita, Manthara, Soorpanakha, and Sambooka's daughter, are the protagonists of the four key stories.

The style that is adopted is that of autobiographical monologues by the female protagonists. But behind these autobiographical reflections there is an invisible force at work, the thoughts and emotions of the woman and writer that is Joseph. She literally empowers these characters to talk of themselves, what happened to them and how these facts have been pushed under the general story-telling and narrative of Ramayanam, the epic. So, it becomes

at one level the commentary of the characters themselves on the events related in the story of the Ramayanam and its patriarchal ideology and at another level the commentary of Joseph, the woman, the author, and the ideologue on the literary text and its underlying feminist perspective.

I felt that these were not mere subversions of the original, but a modern and feministic reinterpretation of the Ramayanam itself. She created not only a new language but a whole new perspective of the Ramayanam which is more acceptable to me as a woman and a feminist than the original one. All the older Ramayanams, except Valmiki Ramayanam, were written primarily from a man's point of view. Even the Valmiki Ramayanam only hints at the flaws in Raman's character and the whole idea of Rama Rajyam. But, Joseph actually challenges the patriarchal version of the Ramayanam and provides an alternative text.

In Kerala, the questioning of the traditional Ramayanam began very early in the twentieth century. It started and culminated in Kumaran Asan's long poem, 'Chintavishtayaya Sita' (A Thoughtful Sita 1919) where Sita, abandoned by Raman and rescued by Valmiki, living in his ashram, questions Raman's actions as an individual as well as a king. She points out that she, who was also his *praja* (subject), was not allowed to speak and defend herself. Later, when C.N. Sreekantan Nair wrote the play *Kanchana Sita*, the questioning of Raman took on a sharper edge. In Nair's play, it is not only Sita who directly questions Raman, but also Urmila, Kausalya, Bharatan, Hanuman, and Valmiki. They even assert that justice which discards personal emotions is not justice at all. Hanuman hints that there is no Raman without Sita, thus suggesting that the Ramayanam is not just Raman's story, but Raman's and Sita's story. A new tilt is given to the whole epic which is more humane and acceptable in a modern context. The rigidity of Raman's justice and the loopholes in the very same justice are clearly pointed out. The whole play uses a powerfully poetic as well as a rational language which again

sets a new trend at the time it was published. Later, the filmmaker, late G. Aravindan made a film, *Kanchana Sita*, using Nair's play as a reference point. But, the cinematic technique differed vastly from the dramatic one. In Aravindan's film, Sita is not present in her human form. She is portrayed as nature and her presence is only seen through her absence and the movements in nature whenever her presence was required. While Nair's play is very vocal and dramatic, Aravindan's film is marked by its silence and contemplative nature. Aravindan used tribal men to depict Raman, Lakshmanan, and Bharatan, thereby giving importance to viewing the epic as the story of the original inhabitants of India, the tribals. Next came Joseph's 'Ramayana Stories' which were autobiographical, personal, and poetic. They gave emphasis to the feminist interpretations and the woman's point of view. Lastly, I wrote a poem entitled 'To Sita' which is a denouncing of Sita, the traditional heroine who failed to protest whenever she was humiliated in public by her husband, Raman. I have strived to point out that far from being a model to modern Indian women, she had done harm to them by creating a traditional and patriarchal ideal woman. So, the subversion of the Ramayanam has come full circle in Kerala, using different literary forms such as poetry, drama, and short story and another medium, namely film. It is this subversion of the Ramayanam and presentation of a new interpretation, which have been given prominence in this volume juxtaposing Joseph's stories with Nair's play.

My original intention was to have only Joseph's 'Ramayana Stories' published in a single volume with a critical introduction. It was Mini Krishnan of Oxford University Press who suggested that I should include Nair's *Kanchana Sita* also in this volume, in order to give it a greater historicity. It also brings forth two kinds of expression—a woman looking at the Ramayanam from a woman's point of view and a man looking at the Ramayanam from a woman's point of view. Through these dual expressions the woman's point of view (as distinguished from a patriarchal point of view) attains a fuller dimension.

There are two aspects in which these two works differ. One is that of language and the other is that of the points of view and the construction. Joseph's language is very poetic and lyrical. At the same time, she is using the personal, subjective point of view when she relates the stories. Joseph is the protagonist of every narration. In this sense it becomes autobiographical, each person narrating her story, which also becomes in the broader sense, Joseph's story. She gives a political tinge to these stories by bringing in the dialectics between the victor and the vanquished, the dominant and the dominated, the man and the woman, the tribal and the urban dweller, and the Aryan and the Dravidian. In every case, the victim is the woman. So, while the stories' focus is the female protagonist, the broader political implications are also sewn in at appropriate times. She also points out the great affinity between women and nature (natural elements), thereby hinting that insulting a woman is equal to polluting the environment. In short, she is presenting an alternate point of view which is complete in itself and different from the existing patriarchal one.

Nair, too, is very pro-woman in his play. He is a liberal who gives a great deal of emphasis to women's point of view. But, the style and language he adopts is theatrical, dramatic, and sanskritized—a Malayalam that is more rhetorical, objective, and impersonal. He takes the position of a liberal, sympathetic observer, while Joseph takes on the position of the insider. The language and style of Nair is detached and weighty. Even the poetry in the language is more controlled but more theatrical and universal. He also touches on the political aspects such as the difference between the Aryans and the Dravidians and the land dwellers and the tribals. But, here also, it is from a pedagogic and objective point of view. The denunciation of Raman the hero and Rama Rajyam comes not only from women but others such as Bharatan (prince), Valmiki (sage), Hanuman (monkey), and Urmila and Kausalya (women). So, the condemnation also takes on the stature of a universal one rather than that of a specific feminist point of view. While Joseph

adopts pithy, layered and poetic Malayalam with depth and intensity, Nair uses grandiloquent language which is intended to arouse the masses. Joseph goes inward into the thoughts and ideas, Nair moves outward and becomes oratorical. The juxtaposition of these two works is intended as a study in the differences in approach and language in gender-conscious literature.

Translating these two different sets of literary works required different skills. *Kanchana Sita*, though it has a highly literary and poetic language, was far easier to translate as it was more direct. Here, the main problem was that of finding exact equivalents in English for Sanskrit words or Malayalam words with Sanskritic content. But this could be overcome by using the Sanskrit words and using a supporting glossary. The other problem was that of creating in English the poetic as well as the highly logical nature of the Malayalam used in the play. The length of the sentences with several clauses also posed a problem. I had to keep in mind that this was a play written to be enacted, so the dramatic content of the original had to be conveyed in the translation while keeping up the flow in English. It took three drafts to reach an acceptable version. I have to thank Mini for her editorial suggestions and her patience as we jointly went through a line-by-line reading of the whole play in Malayalam. Her's was a valuable contribution to the translation.

Translating Joseph's stories was a totally different experience. Joseph's language is pithy, and many-layered. It is modern, poetic, and at the same time geared to convey a whole different ideology. Joseph has an infinite capacity to give different textures to the language used in the same story. At one point, it would be lyrical and poetical, in the next, coarse and raw, quickly followed by highly sanskritized and weighty sentences. From emotional to literary, from rational to mystical, from complex to simple, from full-length lines to two-word sentences, she is like the flow of a turbulent river in spate. Exciting, challenging, scintillating, never a moment's rest. To recreate the essence of Joseph's Malayalam into a radically different language

has been a great experience. Mini and I shared this exhilarating experience with great perseverance. In fact, working with such an insistent editor was an inspiration.

The difficulty was especially felt in the story 'Taykulam' where Soorpanakha, the protagonist, does not speak the highly sanskritized upperclass Malayalam, but a language which borrows freely from the dialect spoken by the working classes of Kerala. I have not attempted to create the subalternity in the language or the words for the simple reason that in English it is very difficult to distinguish between the normal and the subaltern language. For example, take the word: 'njan' and 'een' which both mean 'I'. There is no way in which one can show the difference in these terms without over-extending or distorting the English language. I also feel that the 'subaltern ideology' in this story comes through the ideas and expressions and not through the language. Soorpanakha is depicted as a tribal, a Dravidian, and a woman from a lower caste. Her identities cannot be separated. In the final analysis, she has to be treated as a passionate, sensual woman, very close to nature and the elements, who has been marginalized, ignored, and humiliated. Usage of the dialect is only one part of the literary expression. Her thought process, awareness, and questioning is that of a woman rebel. In that sense she is not just a regional heroine, but a universal, eternal woman. In my translation I have tried to balance the regional flavour with the universal by being faithful to Joseph's inimitable use of Malayalam.

This volume cannot be seen as a mere translation of two sets of original works in Malayalam. The combining of the two is itself a political act. It represents the questioning of the Ramayanam which has been a tradition in Malayalam literature. It also subverts the traditional Ramayanam and presents it from different points of view—feministic, Dravidian, and subaltern. Therefore, it has to be treated as part of an alternate literature. The social, political, and cultural layers cannot be overlooked. In fact, each line or each

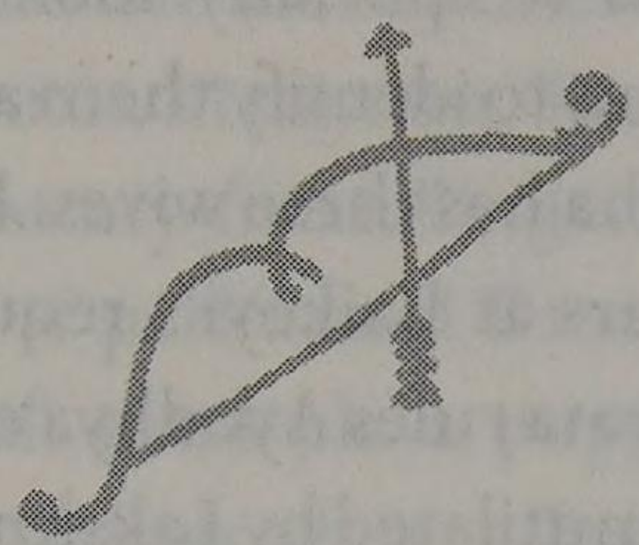
paragraph contains enough thought for compiling a whole literary and linguistic alternate literature.

In spite of the many differences—such as that one half is written by a woman and the other by a man, the one composed in the fifties and the other in the seventies, one having a highly sanskritized and verbose language, while the other uses a more modern and pithy language—there are similarities that justify their being published in the same volume under the title *Retelling the Ramayana*. Both are written from a woman's perspective. Both bring out the political context of Aryan versus Dravidian, the upper castes versus the lower castes, rajya dharma versus the dharma of love and human relationships. Both subvert the original Ramayanam and its ideology of Rama Rajyam. Both emphasize the importance of questioning tradition and having a new outlook with regard to the language and literature of the land.

This process has been long and, at times, wearying. All through, I had the unstinted support and cooperation of Mini Krishnan, Editor, Translations. Mini was not just performing the duties of an editor while going through these translations. Her interest in the nuances and intricacies of the language and culture-specific details allowed me to use her as a sounding board. This volume, in its present form, is the result of the passion and commitment both of us felt to these two works of literature. I accept, in all humility, Mini's contribution in giving this work its present shape.

It would be remiss on my part if I did not express my gratitude to Sarah Joseph and C.N. Unnikrishnan, son of late C.N. Sreekantan Nair, in allowing the works in Malayalam to be translated and published in this manner.

VASANTHI SANKARANARAYANAN



Introduction

Romila Thapar in her foreword to *Questioning Ramayanas: A South Asian Tradition* edited by Paula Richman, cites an instance from a speech by the great Pakistani fiction writer Intizar Hussain: Ayodhya that had so far been just a fabulous kingdom, a resonance, an imaginary space, was suddenly reduced to an actual site on the map of India after the demolition of the Babri Masjid. He had to remap his geography as a writer after that incident to identify the birth place of Rama with a little town in north India.

No single text in India has ever been exclusively titled Ramayana. It is the name of a tradition, a multiplicity of oral, written, and performed texts, each equally authentic as a creation of popular imagination. In her critique of the televized Ramayana, Thapar comments that the Ramayana does not belong to any one moment in history, because it has its own history which is embedded in the many versions which were woven around the theme at different times and places. The appropriation of the story by a multiplicity of groups meant a multiplicity of versions through which the social aspirations and ideological concerns of each group were articulated.[1] The versions of Ramayana obtained in South Asia are

so diverse that one has to specially look for the narratological resemblances that help us to identify them as Ramayanas. In almost every version, Dasaratha has three wives; Rama is banished to the forest for fourteen years at Kaikeyi's request to her husband to redeem her boon; Bharata rules Ayodhya on Rama's behalf; in the forest Soorpanakha is mutilated by Lakshmana in response to her love plea; Rama kills Bali, the monkey-king and Sambooka, the Dravidian sage; Ravana hears of Sita's beauty from his sister, abducts Sita from the forest with the help of the demon Maricha; a war ensues between Rama and Ravana on account of this abduction; Rama is helped by Sugreeva, Hanuman, and Ravana's own brother Vibhishana; Rama retrieves Sita, but despite the test of fire which proved her purity, refuses to take her back as she had lived in another man's household; rumours force him to abandon Sita in the forest where under Sage Valmiki's care she gives birth to the twins, Lava and Kusa; when she finally comes back Rama again subjects her chastity to test at which Sita prays to her mother earth to take her back to her bosom. Bereft of Sita, Rama too abandons the world. While these recur in most of the versions, they differ profoundly in the settings, portrayal of characters, in the narrative details, in the presentation of episodes and in the relative significance of people and events.

A.K. Ramanujan even cites a story where the king of spirits tells Hanuman—who reaches the nether world in search of Rama's ring that had disappeared through a hole—that there have been several Ramas and whenever one incarnation is about to be over Rama's ring falls down. The king shows Hanuman a whole platter with thousands of rings and tells him, that these are all Rama's rings and asks him to pick out *his* Rama's ring. He adds that his Rama too had already entered the river Sarayu, after crowning his twin sons, Lava and Kusa. This story is available in several versions in several languages: besides all mainstream Indian languages and many marginalized languages such as Tulu, and tribal languages like Bhili

and Santhali; we find the tale in Annamese, Balinese, Cambodian, Chinese, Javanese, Laotian, Malaysian, Thai, and Tibetan. Sanskrit alone has more than twenty-five tellings in different forms. There is also a whole range of performed Ramayanas as in Ramleela, Ramanattam, Kathakali, mask plays, puppet plays, shadow plays, and other folk dance and drama forms. Besides there are paintings, sculptures and bas-reliefs, inscriptions, and traditional hand-woven narrative designs all of which provide visual interpretation to the story.

Father Camille Bulcke, the Ramayana scholar, speaks of the three hundred versions of the Rama story including the Buddhist and the Jaina tellings. A.K. Ramanujan[2] has looked closely at the Ahalya episode in Valmiki and Kampan, the Tamil poet, to bring out the differences in their approaches. Kampan, he points out, takes off from Nammalvar the Tamil Bhakti poet, considering Rama to be not a god-man like Valmiki's, but God himself and also is much more dramatic, passionate, and subtle in his understanding of Indra's seduction of Ahalya. Kampan while depending on Valmiki also brings into his telling various folklore motifs. The Jaina Ramayana of Vimalasuri, *Paumacariya* (Prakrit for *Padmacharita*) is a *prati* (counter)—*purana*, begins with Ravana's genealogy and portrays Ravana as a noble devotee of Jaina masters, a learned man who earns his magical powers and weapons through austerities. He has even taken a vow not to touch an unwilling woman and returns a queen—who is in love with him—to her husband after a siege. In this Ramayana, Ravana is a great man undone by a passion he has vowed against but cannot resist. In another Jaina version, Sita is Ravana's daughter, his ignorance of this leads him to an Oedipal situation. In the Jaina tellings Ravana invokes admiration and pity, and not hatred. Lakshmana is the one who fights Ravana here; and Lakshmana and Ravana are the eighth incarnation of Vasudeva and Prativasudeva, a hero and an antihero destined to fight in life after life. Lakshmana goes to hell for his assassination while Rama, an evolved and non-

violent Jaina soul attains salvation. One may notice that Sita is Ravana's daughter in several other stories like the Jaina *Vasudevahimdi*, in Kannada folk tradition as in the song sung by *tamburi dasayyas* where Sita is conceived by Ravana (here, Ravula), in Telugu folklore and in many South-East Asian Ramayanas. In the Thai Ramayana, called *Ramakirti* or *Ramakien*, Ravana's wife gives birth to Sita as she eats some rice taken to her by a cow from a rice ball received by Dasaratha after his sacrifice. Again it is Soorpanakha's daughter who, to avenge her mother, enters Sita's service as a maid, forces Sita to draw a picture of Ravana, makes it indelible and draws Rama's attention to it. Rama in a fit of jealous rage sentences Sita to death. But Lakshmana, in his compassion, abandons her alive in the forest, bringing back a deer's heart as witness to the execution. Rama later finds out she is alive and to give her refuge, sends her word that *he* is dead. Sita rushes to his palace to find she has been tricked and requests mother earth to take her. Hanuman goes to the subterranean regions and fails to bring her back. Finally, it is Siva who reunites the couple.

Theravada Buddhists have also crystallized their own classical versions of the Rama story with a specific Buddhist religious slant. *Dasaratha Jataka* and the Laotian *Phra Lak/Phra Lam* (Lakshmana and Rama) are two examples. In this tradition the narrator is Buddha himself, and the events take place at the beginning of the present cosmic epoch when Buddha was living one of his more eventful previous lives. Their account draws heavily on the classical Theravada cosmogony that appears in the Pali *Tipitaka*, most fully in the *Aganna Sutta*. The *Phra Lak/Phra Lam* cosmogony begins with the descent of two *brahma* deities, a male and a female from the heavens (where they had escaped the destruction of the old world) to the new earth taking shape out of the waters. They savour the material world and thus lose their divine powers. Unable to return to heaven they live on earth, found the city of Inthapatha on the banks of the Mekong River and establish a dynastic succession that divides into one line that gives rise to Ravana and the other to Lak and Lam, that is

Lakshmana and Rama. Bodhisatta is reborn as Rama (it is Indra who facilitates such rebirth processes) when Ravana's activities pose a threat to the order. Rama and his companions are identified as the rebirth precursors of the Buddha and his family and disciples. This ensures the sacrality of the major characters in *Dasaratha Jataka*. In the *Phra Lak/Phra Lam* story, main figures also participate in the sacrality associated with divinities central to Buddhist cosmology. In some texts in the Thai tradition, Ravana is identified as an earlier form of Mara, the personalized embodiment of desire and death defeated repeatedly by the Buddha during the course of his final life as Gotama. In some other versions, Ravana is identified as the rebirth precursor of Devadatta, Siddhartha's angry and greedy cousin, his enemy from birth, who repeatedly challenges him—as in the case of the famous argument over the ownership of the bird shot down by Devadatta and revived by Siddhartha—but is ultimately overcome by the Buddha's superior wisdom and compassion. Both the tellings of the Rama story, however, culminate in Rama's victorious return to his own country and his installation as the legitimate successor to Dasaratha. In the *Dasaratha Jataka*, Rama returns to his father's kingdom of Benares and establishes his benevolent rule and restores spiritual and moral order. In the *Phra Lak/Phra Lam* tradition, Rama returns to the Laotian city of this birth and establishes a government based on Buddhist virtues.

These examples are enough to show that there are many Ramayanas, each as authentic as any other, and they differ at times in essential details, in descriptions, in the way they begin, in the emphasis given to different characters and in their portrayal, in the episodes related, and in their endings. In fact, there is very little common to these versions except some shadow of a relational structure as outlined earlier.

I cited these narratives only to show that the authors in this volume, Sarah Joseph and C.N. Sreekantan Nair, even while admittedly taking a radical stance, are also participating in, and extending,

a tradition of innovation, revision, and interrogation that pre-exists these interpretations.

Joseph is a committed feminist, both as a writer and an activist and has developed a subtle and elaborate critique of patriarchy—its real as well as verbal practices, world views, and its strategies of social hegemony—through her articles and her works of fiction. She has looked at languages, myth, and day-to-day relations in her attempt to create a counter literary practice of retrieval, revision, and resistance. In her stories like 'Oro Ezhuthkariyude Ullilum' (In the Mind Every Woman Writer), 'Muditheyyam Urayunnu' (The Hairgoddess Possessed), 'Chavunilam' (Fields of Death), 'Balidanam' (Offering of Sacrifice), 'Pathalappadikal' (Steps to the Nether World), 'Papathara' (Mound of Sin), 'Prakasiniyude Makkal' (Prakasini's Children), 'Dampathyam' (Married Life), 'Chaayapatam' (The Photo), 'Scooter, Sapayanam' (The Journey of a Curse), and her novels like *Alahayade Penmakkal* (The Daughters of Alaha) and *Mattathi*, she has interrogated the concept of the masculine, challenged the power-knowledge nexus that sustains the patriarchal discourse, unveiled the belief-systems that determine the role of the male and female in society, revealed the cruelty that underlines unequal marital relationships, upheld female bonding, re-examined the celebration of motherhood, expressed the intimate relationship between (wo)man and nature, and used the power of the dialect and of woman's private language to fight linguistic standardization. Her stories based on Ramayana try to look at mythology from the point of view of the gendered subaltern and interrogate/revise the conventional interpretations of characters and situations.

The writer reminds the reader again and again of the cruelty of the battle by pointing to the fierce scenes of destruction, mothers' wails, and children's cries. Sita represents all suffering and humiliated women on earth; she remembers Soorpanakha punished for her love with mutilation in a show of Aryan virility.

Joseph weaves nature and the elements beautifully into her

narrative to underline its archetypal significance and symbolic import. The entire story raises questions of justice and injustice, of war and peace, and of the relationship between love and power, which is the central theme in the Ramayana. The subversion of the conventional reading is achieved not by revising the story itself, but by a gradual substitution of its significance through a reworking of detailed descriptions of landscapes and of men and women, a careful use of epithets, sharp dialogues, invocation of relevant scenes, memories and moods, and the strategic employment of symbols, myths, and metaphors.

Velcheru Narayana Rao,[3] examining the Ramayana songs sung by women in Telugu, has pointed out how even while apparently being faithful to the story, they interrogate Rama's wisdom and justice especially in relation to Sita. Rao calls these oral narratives *Seethayanas* as they are woven around Sita rather than Rama. Sita's wedding, her journey to her mother-in-law, the games that she plays with Rama and always wins, her description of her life with Rama to Hanuman in Lanka, the birth of Lava and Kusa and their later battle with Rama, and the revenge of Soorpanakha are some of the chief subjects of these songs. The whole story is looked at from a woman's point of view so that even Kausalya's labour is explained vividly, with the midwife's instructions intact. Domestic rituals typical of Andhra brahmin households, Sita's wedding presents, the incident of Sita, late after household jobs, being locked out by an irritated Rama, and her enlisting Kausalya's support in getting the bedroom door opened, the marriage of Shanta, Rama's elder sister; all these receive special treatment.[4] Men's position is titular in all these scenes; the real power is with women who take the initiative and manage things well. Sita is shown as the incarnation of Lakshmi who comes to help Vishnu in his incarnation as Rama. She descends to earth and is born as Sita on a lotus flower in Lanka. Ravana finds her and gives her to Mandodari. When Sita is twelve, he wants to marry her, but brahmins advise against it as Sita would

destroy Lanka and ask Ravana to cast her into the sea. It is thus that Sita reaches Janakan's hands. Kaikeyi in these songs is not a bad character. Kausalya advises Dasaratha to adopt Shanta as their daughter who will bring luck to the family and lead to the birth of boys. Kaikeyi is made to agree to this on condition that Bharata will inherit the kingdom. Shanta is later married to Risyasringa. Here Valmiki is subtly subverted as in his Ramayana, *women have no role in the birth of Rama and Lakshmana*, and Kaikeyi is pictured as the embodiment of evil. It also questions the brahmin belief that to have a daughter first is inauspicious. Women in those songs are strong.[5] Shanta refuses to bathe Sita's golden image for Rama's sacrifice as she was not consulted before he abandons Sita in the forest. Similarly, Lava and Kusa actually kill Hanuman, Lakshmana, and even Rama in the battle that follows the capture of Rama's sacrificial horse; Valmiki brings them back to life. But the children insist on Rama bowing at their feet before he gets back his horse as he had been so cruel to the pregnant Sita. They also stop Sita from meeting Rama. Gods and goddesses enter into an argument over this where all gods support Rama and all their wives support the children. Finally, Rama bows at his sons' feet uttering Kausalya's name. Even then the sons first refuse to go with Rama to Ayodhya as he had planned to kill them in the womb.

Lakshmana is shown in these songs as more understanding, protective, and affectionate to Sita than Rama. When Rama orders him to kill Sita, Lakshmana only abandons her in the forest to visit her later while in labour. Urmila, Lakshmana's wife, also receives special treatment. Rama's wisdom, propriety, honesty, and integrity are strongly interrogated in these songs; only the criticism comes not from Sita but from the elders of the family like Kausalya or Shanta. With Shanta's support, Rama's sisters-in-law, Urmila, Mandavi, and Srutakirti also question Rama. Lava and Kusa also criticize their father in defence of their mother. In these women's versions it is always the lowly characters who emerge as winners and the status

quo values of the male-dominated world are always questioned, thus making these a series of counter-texts that work against the grain of public Ramayanas. The songs sung by lower-caste women reflect their dissatisfaction with the dominant upper caste masters for whom they work rather than with the men of their own families. They articulate their state of double oppression—as women and as low-castes. They sympathize with Sita as a woman, but when it comes to men they reject Rama, and greater attention is given to Ravana and to Lanka, though this rejection is subtle and subversive, not open and confrontational. Joseph's attitude to Sita seems to combine these twin aspects: she sympathizes equally with Sita and Ravana as the vanquished victims of an oppressive moral order of which Rama is the champion. Rama's image as *maryadapurushotham* is under question here: his *maryada* is shown to be that of a *purusha*, the dominating Aryan, kshatriya male. The interrogation continues in her stories based on other episodes in Ramayana as we shall soon see.

'Black Holes' deals with Manthara's escape from Ayodhya on the night of Rama's coronation. Manthara, the traditional bad character in Ramayana, is a liar, scandalmonger, and spy. The story begins dramatically with Manthara, spying for Aswapathi, Kaikeyi's father and shown as a typical subaltern, a victim of power and intrigue, surprised by the evil that sustains power. Ayodhya, to her, is a stage set for a game of power.

'Clan of the First (Mothers)' has for its female protagonist Soorpanakha, Ravana's sister, after her encounters with Rama and Lakshmana. The story is based on the famous episode in the *Aranyakanda* of Ramayana that proves a crucial turning point in the whole story, the catalyst which sets off a chain of events, chiefly Ravana's abduction of Sita that engenders the battle between Rama and Ravana. The mutilation of Soorpanakha, in most tellings carried out by Lakshmana at Rama's behest after she proclaims her love and makes sexual advances to Rama at Panchavati, is also

important from an ethical point of view as it sheds light on Rama's character and on attitudes to female sexuality in Indian culture. The interpretations of the episode reflect a profound ambivalence in the tradition concerning the actions of the three characters involved. On the one hand there is the desire to show Rama as a fair, chivalrous protector of women and the weak in general. On the other, there is a deep suspicion of women's power and sexuality when unchecked by male control. Kathleen M. Erndl[6] has made a comparative study of the episode as it occurs in five Ramayanas—*Ramayana* of Valmiki, *Iramavataram* of Kampan, *Adhyatma Ramayana, Ramcharitmanas* of Tulsidas, and *Radhesyam Ramayan* of modern Hindi, texts produced between probably second century BC and twentieth century AD, to prove how ambiguous are the dichotomies critical to Indian culture (good and evil, pure and impure, divine and human, male and female etc.). In Valmiki Ramayana, Soorpanakha is instantly infatuated with Rama as he meets her in the Dandaka forest. The poet draws a sharp contrast between Rama's beauty and Soorpanakha's hideousness. Soorpanakha introduces her brothers—Ravana, Kumbhakarna, Vibhishana, Khara, and Dushana—to Rama and declares her love for Rama, invites, tempts him to marry her, and offers to devour the 'ugly' and 'unfaithful' Sita and Lakshmana so that they—Soorpanakha and Rama—will be free to roam the sylvan woods. Rama refuses, as he is already married and asks her to approach his virile and virtuous brother, Lakshmana. This has been seen by interpreters as a cruel jest as Lakshmana too was married. It is unclear as to whether he was taunting his brother affectionately or having fun at the poor woman's expense. Some scholars have seen in this a justification for considering as a later interpolation *Balakanda* where Lakshmana weds Urmila. A third opinion comes from P.S. Subramanya Sastri ('Telling a Lie or Otherwise by Rama at Panchvati') who points out that *akrtadara* can also mean 'not accompanied by his wife' or 'not using his wife'. Rama pities his brother who had left for the forest before he had an opportunity to enjoy the pleasures

of married life. Soorpanakha now addresses her plea to Lakshmana who says he is Rama's slave and cannot be a loyal husband to her; she should ask Rama to take her as his second wife after which Rama will abandon the 'ugly' Sita. Soorpanakha misses the joke as she has no sense of humour: she is the 'other', the non-human. Soorpanakha is about to pounce on Sita. Rama becomes angry, says it is wrong to joke with cruel people and orders Lakshmana to mutilate the passionate rakshasi. Lakshmana cuts off Soorpanakha's nose and ears with his sword. She runs to Khara who fights Rama along with Dushana and Trisiras, all of whom are defeated by Rama. Ravana hears the story and decides to avenge Rama by abducting Sita, the news of whose beauty, has also aroused his desire.

In Joseph's 'Mother Clan', Soorpanakha's breasts grow into a metaphor as in Mahasveta Devi's story 'Stanadayini'. It stands for womanhood as well as motherhood. The source of her breastmilk in Soorpanakha's monologue also forms the roots of her clan and her blood. She remembers her round black and beautiful breasts that suckled many generations. She cannot pardon the two men who drew their sword to kill the woman and the mother in her: Ravana would never have done such an unchivalrous thing. She and Ayomukhi together represent the anger of all the mothers of the earth. She justifies her desire as natural: 'The tree blossoms because of passion. The forest blooms and the sea melts because of passion. If a woman's passion is denounced as wrong and harmful, it is the fruit-bearing earth which will suffer.' The day the clan of the mothers became angry, the dreams caught fire and whirlwinds filled the trumpets. The loss of the nose also is registered concretely in the story when Soorpanakha begins to gather the distilled scent of forest flowers through her mutilated nostrils. The scent of champaka flowers drives her mad with feminine desire: 'To distill and drink the fragrance-laden breeze of champaka flowers; to make garlands for my hair, which looked like bees clustered. Or to encircle my wrists and breasts with bracelets made of champaka flowers. Finally

to roll on the ground, matted with champaka flowers.' She is aroused by the fragrance of Panchavati. 'This is my love-forest ... Every single tree in this forest is mine! My lover. He bursts into bloom only when I ask him to. On a thousand nights I have mated with the forest.' Soorpanakha alternates between feelings of desire and ecstasy and of shame and anger at those who had insulted her colour and class and damaged her inwardly and outwardly. Her wrath takes new dimensions here as colour, class, language, and gender are all invoked in her vow of revenge. Her hatred is also for Vibhishana who betrayed his brother in his hunger to rule Lanka. She also condemns the treacherous killing of Bali by Rama. When Ayomukhi reports to her the fire-test ordered for Sita, Soopanakha cannot suppress her laughter. The story ends in her loud laughter of abandon leaving the reader to sense her frustration, anger, and thirst for revenge.

'Jathiguptan and Janakiguptan' is a sarcastic fantasy that is only partially and obliquely linked to the Ramayana by the names Janaki, the forest and verses from the Ramayana used ironically to laugh at a man like Rama in a new incarnation carrying weapons in the harmless and beautiful forest. The story with its exposure of the absurdity of contemporary politics and the triviality of bureaucracy is very different from Joseph's other stories in style as well as conception.

'What is not in the Story' features Lava and Kusa, Sita's children by Rama during her exile in the woods. They are curious to know from Valmiki, their teacher whom they call their father (*thatha*), the details of their mother's tale, especially, the circumstances in which Rama abandoned her in the forest. On the way they meet Unni, the son of the brahmin whom Rama had slain in order to revive Sambooka.

The author's voice begins. Lava and Kusa recited Ramayana in the Naimisaranya forest but Valmiki is silent on Sambooka's children; did they live to reach Naimisaranya to tell their version of Sambooka's tale? History, epics, and folklore are alike in being silent on this

question. It may be noted here that the Sambooka episode has also troubled several interpreters of Ramayana who have found means to justify the killing. The case of the Marathi *Ananda Ramayana* is an example. There, not only does a brahmin boy die on account of the shudra's tapas that is against dharma, but also a kshatriya from Madhupri, a vaisya from Prayaga, an oil presser from Hastinapura, a blacksmith's daughter-in-law from Haridvara, and a shoe-maker's daughter from Ujjayini—thus the effects of the sin cut across caste and gender. Also Rama grants many boons to Sambooka before he dies, that he would go to Vaikuntha after death, that Rama, Sita and Lakshmana would come to reside on Mount Vindhya and their *bhaktas* would visit Sambooka before they worshipped Rama. Sambooka dies well-pleased (*susanthushtam*) in the story.

Joseph's story, however, uses the journey and the meeting of the five children as a site for raising many questions: the question of writing and its ever-unrealized intentions, the question of reading what is silent and suppressed in writing, the question of multiple versions of a story told from different perspectives: Lava and Kusa, cursed to grow up fatherless in the woods, Unni cursed to carry the burden of guilt eternally in his heart as his rebirth had demanded Sambooka's sacrifice, and Sambooka's children looking for a platform to articulate their grief and loss and to present their oppositional narrative to an assembly that admires the murderer of their father. Joseph's stories based on the *Ramayana* are bound together by her sympathy for the victim and her deep sense of justice that puts Rama squarely as the accused in the witness box.

Kanchana Sita (The Golden Sita) is the first play in C.N. Sreekantan Nair's trilogy based on the Ramayana, the other two being *Saketam* and *Lankalakshmi*. These plays published long before Joseph's Ramayana stories, have clearly inspired the latter along with Kumaran Asan's dramatic monologue, *Chintavishtayaya Sita* referred to at the beginning. Nair was a major innovator of Malayalam drama along with C.J. Thomas. While Thomas turned to certain episodes in the Bible to

express his vision of man and society, Nair turned to *Ramayana* to embody his ideas of love, power, and justice. They also wrote the first truly modernist plays in Malayalam. While Thomas wrote *Crime 27 of the Year 1128,* a Pirandello-like metaplay, Nair wrote *Kali*, an almost surrealist play on the absurdity of violence. Nair's plays are marked by their classical style, allusive, rhythmic, sublime, truly dramatic and deeply poetic with a Shakespearean profundity that is difficult to capture in translation.

Kanchana Sita captures one of the most intense and dramatic moments of the Ramayana story. Sita is the absentee-heroine here appearing only at the end. Usha Nilsson's analysis of the Awadhi and Bhojpuri women's songs, Velcheru Narayana Rao's study of Telugu women's songs, Sally J. Sutherland Goldman's close look at Valmiki's *Sundarakanda*, and Madhu Kishwar's forays into the Sitas of popular imagination[7] alike bring out the fascination Sita has exercised on Indians. Madhu Kishwar goes to the extent of saying: 'Rama's rejection of Sita is almost universally condemned, while her rejection of him is held up as an example of supreme dignity. By that act she emerges supremely triumphant, simultaneously leaving a stigma on Rama's name'.[8] Rama has no existence without Sita as even word compounds like *Siyaram* or *Seetharam* would show. Ram Manohar Lohia, the socialist thinker, once remarked: 'In India there have been lakhs and crores of women who have called Rama a sinner on behalf of Sita at the time of childbirth, marriage and such occasions. Only those women who labour in other people's farms, who are used to earning their living from hard labour, can dare speak such words.'[9]

Kanchana Sita is a play of questionings of Rama's dharma from diverse yet converging points of view. The tone of the play is set by the initial verse, supposed to be the first ever poem, uttered by an agonized Valmiki on watching a hunter shoot down one of a pair of lovebirds. The despondency, solitude, and sin hinted at in this sloka determine the mood of the whole play. The scene is set in Ayodhya's court room.

Kanchana Sita is a play of many dimensions and its strength comes from its dramatic structure that simultaneously articulates several contradictions to finally deconstruct the myth of Rama. The playwright's undeclared perspective is that of Sage Valmiki, a profoundly human and sagacious view of life and nature where instincts, emotions, and relations are more important than the play of power and soulless statecraft. Sita, earth's daughter, is nature itself in its many seasons of flowering and fall; she is purity and motherhood and as such ultimately refuses to be a cog in the machine of governance. Vasishta represents the very opposite of the virtues symbolized by Valmiki and Sita; he is the cunning brahmin, the representative of the master race whose heartless cleverness senses danger in the world of poetry and of emotions. He lives in his drab world of pragmatic intelligence divorced from nature and the better instincts; he controls the rulers and to him racial pride is more important than love and bonding. Rama is a symbol of racial hatred against the non-Aryans, and in more ultimate terms he is a tragic victim of totalitarian power that can be sustained only by the creation of an 'other' (represented here by Sambooka, Bali, and Ravana, and all 'barbarian' races) and violence against it. At a political level, the play is an indictment of bloodless statecraft and the decadence of democracy into sheer mobpower: the majority can be wrong, as in the case of Ayodhya's people, when they are led by suspicion and hatred. At a historical level, it forces us to look back critically at the myth of Aryan superiority and the role of brahmins all through our history, from an egalitarian, anti-hierarchical point of view. At the ethical level it looks deep into the continuing conflict between love and violence, between living in harmony with nature and striving to 'conquer' it by force. The play is about the tragedy of power, the search for which only leads to solitude and the destruction. It speaks straight to us, and is contemporary in a profound sense as the insights it provides into politics and ethics are of immense import for our times of terror and anxiety, of communal hatred and the distortion of history,

of the arrogant and thoughtless destruction of nature, of pitiless patriarchy, and the quest for absolute power. The juxtaposition of the stories and the play creates a context not only for comparing their treatments of Ramayana but for a re-reading of the epic itself from a secular, democratic and egalitarian point of view.

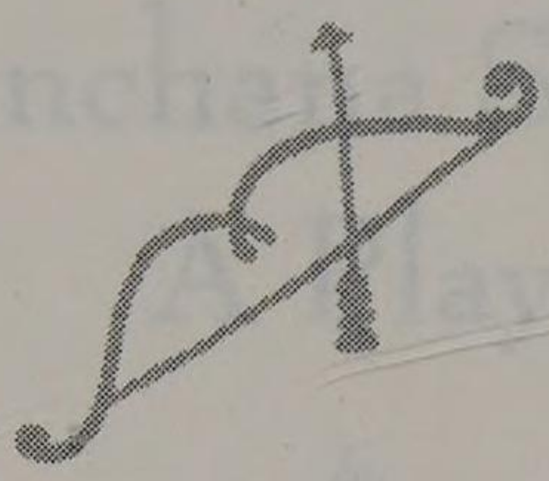
New Delhi — K. SATCHIDANANDAN

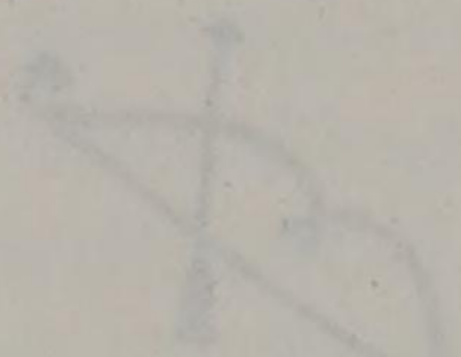
Notes

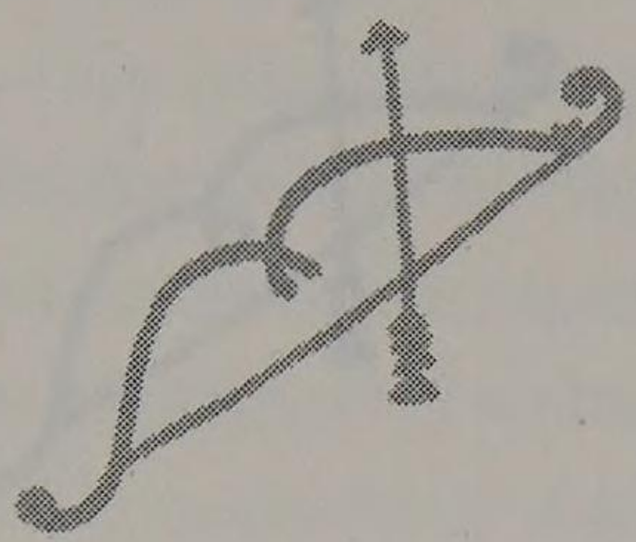
1. Romila Thapar's Foreword in Paula Richman (ed.), *Questioning Ramayanas: A South Asian Tradition*, New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2003.
2. A.K. Ramanujan, 'Three Hundred Ramayanas: Five Examples and Three Thoughts on Translation', in Paula Richman (ed.), *Many Ramayanas: The Diversity of a Narrative Tradition in South Asia*, New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1991, pp. 22–49.
3. Velcheru Narayana Rao, 'A Ramayana of Their Own: Women's Oral Tradition in Telegu', in Paula Richman (ed.), *Many Ramayanas*, pp. 114–36.
4. Velcheru Narayana Rao, 'Sita Locked Out: A Telegu Women's Song of Sita', in *Manushi*, Issue No. 139, Nov–Dec 2003, pp. 26–30.
5. Rao, 'A Ramayana of Their Own'.
6. Kathleen M. Erndl, 'The Mutilation of Surpanakha', in Paula Richman (ed.), *Many Ramayanas*, pp. 67–88.
7. Madhu Kishwar, 'Yes to Sita, No to Ram: The Continuing Hold of Sita on Popular Imagination in India', in Paula Richman (ed.), *Questioning Ramayanas*, pp. 285–308.
8. Ibid.
9. 'Draupadi ya Savitri' in *Jatipratha*, Ram Manohar Lohia, Hyderabad: Samta Vidyalay Nyas, 1964, p. 125.

To

My mother who taught me, from the age of seven,
to recite the Ramayanam flawlessly and rhythmically,
without making any mistakes







Kanchana Sita—
A Play

by

C.N. Sreekantan Nair

CHARACTERS

SITA

URMILA

KAUSALYA

SAMBOOKA'S WIFE

A COMPANION

SRIRAMAN

BHARATAN

LAKSHMANAN

VALMIKI

VASISHTAN

HANUMAN

ASHTAVAKRAN

RISHYASRINGAN

LAVAN

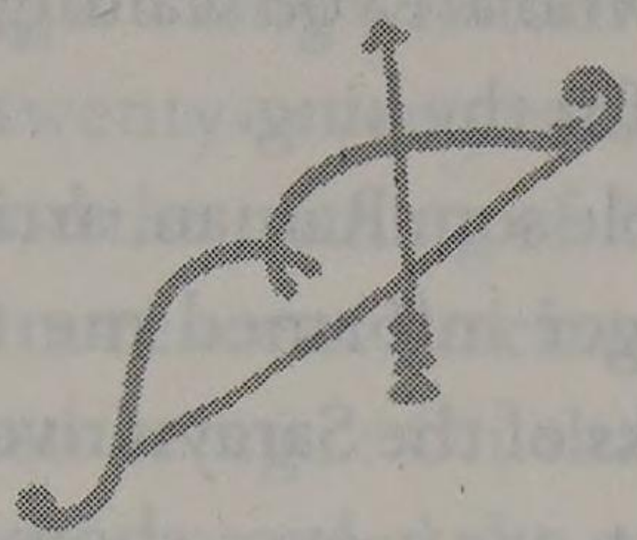
KUSAN

COMMANDER

DOORKEEPERS/SENTINELS

SERVANTS/ATTENDANTS/SOLDIERS

COURTIERS



Act 1

Maa Nishadha, Pratishtam Twam — May you lose your peace of mind
Agama Saswatee Samah — O Hunter! For endless years,
Yat Krauncha Midhunadekam — Blinded by passion you killed
Avadhee Kamamohitam — One of a pair of mating *krauncha* birds.

(A sonorous voice is heard reciting the verse before the curtain rises, followed by the sound of a conch being blown.

The city of Ayodhya. The court at King Ramachandran's palace where the buildings are architectured in granite. In the centre is the king's seat. Placed on both sides of it are other seats. The courtroom is full of single-stone granite pillars.

Urmila sits on the floor, her hand supporting her head, and arm pressed to a wooden seat; dignified, piercing eyes, an expression of permanent despondence. She wears no ornaments other than the customary headgear of princesses and the mangalya-sutram.[3]

After the curtain rises, a woman attendant enters holding a flag on a seven-foot pole, and announces, 'The Queen Mother, Kausalya Devi'. She then moves to the other side of the stage, fixes the flag pole into the floor and stands by like a guard. Soon after, the vastly aged Kausalya, walks in slowly and with great effort. Though completely wrinkled and white with age, the dignity and grandeur of being Dasarathan's wife has not faded. As soon as Kausalya enters, Urmila gets up and greets her reverently.)

KAUSALYA: Daughter, who are you waiting for in this courtroom?

URMILA: I am waiting for the king.

KAUSALYA: Has my noble son, Raman, arrived?

URMILA: The messenger informed me that his Highness has reached the banks of the Sarayu river.

KAUSALYA: (*Fondly*) But, your eyes show another emotion—a tenderness—as though you are expecting young Lakshmanan?

URMILA: (*Bowing her head*) No, Mother, I am here to see the face of the great king ... perhaps ... if happiness suffuses *that* face ... maybe that is what I desire.... I have been waiting in this courtroom for a long time ... if my eyes have the good fortune.

KAUSALYA: Urmila, what are you trying to say? Would Raman have met Sita?

URMILA: I do not know ... but my heart is constantly whispering something like that. After all, he had gone to the Dandaka forest ...

KAUSALYA: Yes! But only at the request of the great sages, to put an end to the arrogance of the demons. Wasn't the sole purpose of his journey the preservation of justice?

URMILA: Still, was it not to the Dandaka forest that he went?

KAUSALYA: The Emperor of Kosala went, not Sita's playmate. The forest of Dandaka may not even have recognized the emperor.

URMILA: Even so, Mother! Isn't that where *Panchavati*[4] is? Where they lived for thirteen years. There, upon watching Raman and Sita making love, the enthralled forest spirits used to perform a dance ritually. There, the *kadambu*[5] will bloom the moment it sets eyes on Raman; the krauncha birds will coo; the peacocks spread their tails and dance; the does will leap in pleasure...and they will ask, 'Where is our beloved friend, Sita?' What will he say in reply? When the waves of the Godavari swell in happiness and enquire 'Where is Sita?' even his emperor's heart will melt. He will remember my sister. On his way back, as he approaches the hermitage of Valmiki, his feet will drag towards that sacred little hut.

KAUSALYA: Child! A king is a king whether he is in Ayodhya or in the forest. After twenty-seven years in this palace you still haven't understood the training of *Raghuvamsam*.[6]

URMILA: Perhaps the innocence of Panchavati may transform the king into a human being.... On that day, when Ravanan kidnapped Sita, who consoled the sobbing Raman, calling out for Sita and wandering aimlessly in the forest? Those clusters of trees and flocks of birds, won't they ask him once again, 'Where is Sita?'

KAUSALYA: Raman, who banished his full-term wife to the forest, will he be upset if the birds of Panchavati questioned him about her? Do not hope that Dasarathan's son would change his mind. That single-minded concentration is the glory of *Aryavamsam*[7].... Daughter, you are reminding this aged mind of many things.... Ayodhya, which sent the heir apparent to the forest on the coronation day, was it not a rejection of the good fortune accumulated by Ikshwaku,[8] and Dileepan?[9] Instead of the golden crown, matted locks covered his head ... (*Sighing deeply*) At that time, Kaikeyi was young. A human being's words were deemed greater than the human being himself ... that misfortune—the sin—spreads its dark shadow even now. From Ayodhya to the forest ... the father threw the son away ... now the husband flings his wife away in the same manner.

URMILA: To realize in full, the glory of Aryavamsam!

KAUSALYA: Possibly. In fact, my son taking to bark-skin—did it not result in the southern part of Bhaarata and Lanka coming under Aryan sovereignty?

URMILA: So, most probably, if the wife is thrown to the mercy of the forest boars, all the seven continents may come under Aryan sovereignty.

KAUSALYA: Child! The women of this ancient country need not know about all that.

URMILA: If ordered to jump into the fire—they must jump ...

KAUSALYA: (*Trapped in memories*) I was the Maharani[10] of Ayodhya.

URMILA: Sita *is* the Maharani.

KAUSALYA: Yes, but the queen is just a queen. She is not the king. The queen is a woman.

URMILA: Perhaps, for the glory of Raghuvamsam the woman has to be sacrificed.

KAUSALYA: Where is Raghuvamsam today? What of the fate of Raghuvamsam after the childless King Raman? (*Thoughtfully*) Urmila! Will Sita act unwisely?

URMILA: The Princess of Mithila is not a fool.

KAUSALYA: The spirits of the forest may be nurturing the buds of Raghuvamsam...

URMILA: To return to Ayodhya again?

KAUSALYA: In the great Sage Valmiki's hermitage, a prince may be running around and playing, his hair matted and dressed in bark-skin. Daughter, can it happen? Oh Controller of the Universe, Lord Vishnu! Please fulfill this old woman's wish...will you allow *Suryavamsam*[11] to sink to an end?

URMILA: Why should it happen? There are enough princesses in Kasi and Magadha.

KAUSALYA: I have seen many things. Still, let me not have the misfortune to see that.... I saw with my own eyes my son removing his silk robes and wearing bark-skin. The coronation of the king of Raghuvamsam was celebrated by owls and foxes. Rocks littered with the spoor of forest animals were his throne.... These eyes also saw the king who gave up his own son to please his second wife Kaikeyi, finally writhing in the flames of sorrow. At the last moment, his head in my lap, my beloved wept, begging my forgiveness.... Daughter, perhaps Ayodhya likes sacrifices.

URMILA: True, it must be true. Your son has continued that tradition even more grandly. To banish a chaste wife at the end of her pregnancy is possible only for Ayodhya.

KAUSALYA: Ayodhya is like me, the mother of fortune and misfortune.

URMILA: And the good fortune will always be banished to the forest by the king's orders!

KAUSALYA: Still, didn't Ayodhya's son defeat Lanka? Did he not kill King Ravanan, whose angry roar used to frighten all the seven continents? These very eyes saw him making this Ayodhya into a heaven and consolidating the Aryavamsam.

URMILA: You also saw human compassion collapse, shattered.

KAUSALYA: Kosalam[12] is now prosperous—with money and grains. There are no premature deaths. What flows in the waters of river Sarayu is happiness. But—what you said is true—where are the saplings of Raghuvamsam? This granite building has been strengthened, these pillars have a permanent quality. But, Saketam[13] without Sita, can it ever be virtuous?

URMILA: A soulless Ayodhya.

KAUSALYA: They will ask you, why does Ayodhya need a soul? That, daughter, is the justice of kings which is not the justice of a human being who has a soul; it is the justice of the wheel of power.

URMILA: And I suppose that those with souls have to be crushed under that wheel.

KAUSALYA: Don't you see that, daughter? Even this old woman's patience is wearing thin. Recently even sleep has forsaken me. Once I stayed awake the whole night; I saw a comet rising in the north-east corner. Is the end near, daughter?

URMILA: Can't you request the king to recall Sita?

KAUSALYA: It does not become the queen of King Dasarathan .... On that day I was in the hermitage of Sage Ashtavakran. Otherwise, I would have objected—whether I succeeded or not.

URMILA: On that day no one knew of the decision to abandon her.

KAUSALYA: Today, I do not have the right to question that dictum of Ayodhya's ruler.

URMILA: Can't you request him?

KAUSALYA: King Dasarathan's queen has never requested anyone for anything. The walls of my heart have the strength to face all sorrows.

URMILA: After all, there is no unhappy person in Ramarajyam, is there?

(*Off-stage full-throated cries 'Victory to King Ramachandran!' are heard.*)

URMILA: The king is coming.

KAUSALYA: Didn't prince Lakshmanan also go with him?

URMILA: He must have returned with the king.

KAUSALYA: (*Smiling tenderly*) Still the face of this woman in waiting is not glowing with happiness.

URMILA: Mother, Urmila's face will never glow with happiness!

KAUSALYA: What? An act of childishness? There should be no sorrow on the faces of married women from noble families. Don't you know from my experience that childlessness is not a permanent state. By and by you will also have children.

URMILA: Children for this woman, permanently separated from her husband? Earlier, when my *Aryaputran*[14], his hair matted and dressed in bark-skin, followed his elder brother to the forest, the pain of my separation began. It has not ended till now.

KAUSALYA: Urmila, I suspect that the fourteen years' separation from your husband has made you less womanly. You have acquired knowledge. The companion of knowledge, detachment, has also invaded and possessed you. A man has many activities. A woman alone can remind a man of her presence. Don't forget that woman is nature. (*Exits, followed by maid*)

URMILA: A woman is nature. But, what about a man, is he different from nature.

(A sentinel enters and announces 'The Heir Apparent, Prince Lakshmanan' and goes off to the other end of the stage. He holds a long spear tipped with a flag. Lakshmanan enters. Urmila prostrates in front of him. Lakshmanan raises Urmila up.)

URMILA: I hope the king and Aryaputran (you) are keeping well.

LAKSHMANAN: With the blessings of Vishnu, both of us are well. Hope you and the *Rajamathavu*[15] are also well.

URMILA: The Rajamathavu is blessed with health and long life. Wasn't the king's journey to the Dandaka forest successful?

LAKSHMANAN: Nothing inauspicious can happen to he whose origin lies in the divine.

URMILA: On your way back, did you not pass *Maharshi*[16] Valmiki's hermitage?

LAKSHMANAN: May have.... Yes, we did.

URMILA: (*Amazed*) Don't you even remember going near the surroundings of the hermitage?

LAKSHMANAN: We saw many hermitages. Many sages welcomed us.... I don't remember Valmiki receiving us.

URMILA: Has Aryaputran forgotten the surroundings of Valimiki's hermitage?

LAKSHMANAN: Do I count hermitages while I lead the army?

URMILA: Because it was there, Aryaputran, that you abandoned the queen that day.

LAKSHMANAN: Haven't twelve years gone by after that?

URMILA: Aryaputran never remembers me. Never mind; your army is functioning smoothly, I hope.

LAKSHMANAN: So well, that there was no occasion even to string the bow.

URMILA: Did the *dasyus*[17] who declared war on you admit defeat and surrender?

LAKSHMANAN: (*Contemptuously*) The dasyus, would they dare to fight once again, with my beloved brother? That too when Raman after defeating Ravanan is reigning as the supreme commander

of Aryavamsam? The dasyus do not have any country or army now. Those black monkeys (the dasyus) are just bonded slaves of the Aryans.

URMILA: Didn't you in the first place go to Dandaka forest on hearing that the demons had made settlements there and were polluting the hermitages of the sages?

LAKSHMANAN: No, no, it is just a story. Long ago, a dasyu who was a king began to do penance there. That too, in the Dandaka forest. But, the king forgave him this time.

URMILA: Isn't a dasyu allowed to perform the ritual of penance?

LAKSHMANAN: Wonderful! Don't you know that only brahmins are allowed to perform the penance?

URMILA: Who decides the rules regarding penance?

LAKSHMANAN: (*Hesitantly*) Sages.

URMILA: Brahmins .... But, even when they opposed it, the penance of Viswamitra, the Rajarshi[18] was not stopped.

LAKSHMANAN: That was another age.

URMILA: Now, the brahmins have a powerful slave—isn't that so?

LAKSHMANAN: (*Angrily*) Urmila! You are misusing the position granted to you by the king's order. This position was granted not because of your knowledge, but out of respect for King Janaka, your father. Of his four daughters given in marriage, only you are in Ayodhya now. In this great city of Ayodhya, no woman has, till this day, indulged in abusive talk.

URMILA: Aryaputran, my beloved husband, you must forgive me. I said what I did say, in sorrow watching the unbelievably strong kshatriya heroes demeaning themselves as the slavish messengers of brahmins. They have decreed that even the learning of Vedas is restricted to brahmins only.

LAKSHMANAN: For the consecration of Aryavamsam, the four-tiered caste system is unavoidable. Even the kshatriya has to obey the laws of that system. Don't you, who have earned a name as a great scholar, know even that?

URMILA: Even though those words are said with contempt, it is a blessing to hear them. For Urmila, it is like the sweet experience of hearing a song not of this world. Earlier, when Aryaputran returned from life in the forest, he did not even recognize me. Today, after returning from another journey to the forest, your tongue has moved at least to scold me. Your humble servant is satisfied. (*Falls at his feet*)

LAKSHMANAN: Please get up.

URMILA: (*Getting up, says emotionally*) Beloved! Is *purusha* (energy) different from *prakriti* (matter)?

LAKSHMANAN: Why is there such a change in your tone today?

URMILA: In the darkness of the forest, didn't you at least once hear, the heartbroken cry of the bird separated from its mate?

LAKSHMANAN: (*Forgetting himself*) Urmila!

URMILA: (*Emotionally*) My beloved!

LAKSHMANAN: (*Suddenly waking up*) This is the King's court.

URMILA: (*With a deep sigh*) True! The expertise of this courtroom rests only in ordering banishments. The springs of love will not seep through this heated rock.

(Off-stage, the words, 'Victory to King Ramachandran' rise from several throats. Two soldiers enter with spears adorned with flags and announce, 'The crown jewel of Raghuvamsam, King Ramachandran is arriving' and take their positions on both sides of the stage. Raman enters. A presence which exudes the glow of kingly might. Middle aged, he looks worried, but his eyes shine. Kingly ornaments adorn his ears, wrists and upper arms. Lakshmanan salutes reverently. Urmila falls at his feet worshipfully.)

RAMAN: May you be blessed with children! (*He sits*) Child! Aren't you well?

URMILA: Yes, your slave is well.

RAMAN: All the sages whom we met praised you which made us very happy. Your scholarship astounds even those who have mastered the divine knowledge (*To Lakshmanan*) Brother, why is she looking so unhappy?

URMILA: Oh king of kings! Does the Godavari flow even today with the same exuberance?

RAMAN: She flows with her face turned towards the sea, hardly paying any attention to the changes of nature.

URMILA: Do the koels of Panchavati coo even now?

RAMAN: Child! Do the ears of the king have time to listen to that sweet music?

URMILA: Your slave has not had the fortune to see the beauties of the forest. Still, all those beautiful sights are etched in my mind. The mountain tops of Panchavati, the thick foliage of the cluster trees, the krauncha bird pairs which nudge each other with their beaks, the small deer which feed on the tender grass shoots and move around gracefully.... All that your wife described after she returned from her stay at the forest have been painted in my heart and stored. Once a young deer was wounded by the sharp edge of 'kusa'[19] grass. Sita saw it, her heart melted at its plight; she took it and looked after it. In the hermitage, the deer would never leave Sita's side. My sister used to cry when she told me the stories about that young deer. Did you, who always protect the sorrowing one, see that deer anywhere in Panchavati?

LAKSHMANAN: Urmila, Haven't you given up your childish ways even now? The great king searching for a young deer! Go and tell your women friends all these foolish stories.

URMILA: Once upon a time, didn't he wander around the whole forest searching for a young deer? Wasn't the great war itself fought for that young deer?

RAMAN: Child, you are not only an intellectual, but also a poet.

URMILA: (*To both*) On that day that animal of the hermitage usually so unafraid took fright at the sight of the prince and ran off.... He followed it through the heart of the forest. Leaving Sita, alone and helpless, Aryaputran went in search of his elder brother. The demon who was waiting for such an opportunity

abducted Sita. Finally, in order to preserve the honour of the Aryan race, did you not conduct a great war itself?

LAKSHMANAN: Nor should the tragedy, the result of that desire for the deer be forgotten by the great queen's sister.

URMILA: No woman of Aryavartham will forget it. That deer fell dead with Raman's arrow. But, Sita is even now writhing in pain. Oh King, did you pass by Valmiki's hermitage, on your way here?

RAMAN: We were not welcomed by Valmiki. Maybe he was absorbed in the rituals of austerities.

URMILA: Is it surprising if the poet who composed the world's first verse upon seeing the death throes of the krauncha bird did not welcome the great King Ramachandran?

LAKSHMANAN: You insolent woman!

(*A messenger enters*)

MESSENGER: *Kulaguru*[20] Sage Vasishtan has arrived with Sage Ashtavakran and Sage Rishyasringan.

RAMAN: Brother! Go and welcome the revered sages in a suitable manner and escort them to the court. (*Lakshmanan goes off; Raman walking slowly towards Urmila*) Child! You seem to forget that the king's throne is an altar of fire.

URMILA: But, I remember that the truly pure souls cannot be burnt even by fire. Your excellency, you who are the preserver of truth, I have a doubt to clear with you if you will forgive me.

RAMAN: (*Immersed in thought*) The heart of a king is secured by the fort battlements of law. Yet, it is made of soft flesh, sister ... well ... what is your doubt?

URMILA: Do you believe that Sita is chaste?

RAMAN: (*Walks around restlessly. After some time*) In the test of fire she was victorious.

URMILA: In order to release Sita, you built a bridge. You defeated the unconquerable demon clan. Yet, later, when you first

met her, I have heard what you said to she who suffered the intense pangs of separation. You asked her, how could Ravanan have controlled himself at the sight of one so beautiful. You asked how any decent person could accept a woman who had lived in another man's house. You declared to all the ten directions that you have no use for your Devi. You ordered her to live as the mistress of your brothers, or worse still, continue her life with Sugrivan or Vibhishanan. So, I am just asking you.

RAMAN: To the diseased eye, the flame of the lamp could be unbearably painful.

URMILA: Then why did you display an unimaginable heroism to liberate Sita?

RAMAN: That was not for her sake. It was important for the security of the Aryans to vanquish the clan of *Malyavan* who tried to establish his sovereignty over the land that lies between the island of Lanka and the mountains of Vindhya. For this, Sita was only an excuse.

URMILA: Your legally wedded wife was just an excuse!

RAMAN: Punishing are the demands of royal justice. Even to give up or to kill, it seeks not the consent of the conscience.

URMILA: You have not cleared my doubt. About Sita's chastity...

RAMAN: People doubt it.

URMILA: Does Sita's husband doubt it?

RAMAN: Sita's husband is primarily the servant of the people.

URMILA: (*Impatiently*) Is King Ramachandran the servant of ignorant people?

RAMAN: (*Angrily, but without loss of control*) Urmila, affection for you makes me tolerate your arrogance.

URMILA: Lord, you must forgive me.

(*Lakshmanan enters and announces, 'Kulaguru Vasishtan, Sage Ashtavakran, Sage Rishyasringan.' The sages enter followed by a few of their disciples. Raman gets up from his seat and falls at their feet reverently. Urmila too falls at their feet.*)

SAGES: Oh great king! May you live long. (*To Urmila*) Daughter, May you be blessed with sons.

RAMAN: This court is now blessed. Ayodhya is brimming with a sense of fulfilment. What good deed have I done to be blessed with this unusual presence of the great sages?

ASHTAVAKRAN: Even aeons of penance will not grant us the sight of Ramachandran whose origin lies in the divine being.

RAMAN: I, a part of the divine being? I am just a kshatriya (ruler) who is the servant of brahmins (advisors). Just a human being.

RISHYASRINGAN: Ramachandran is the essence of sacredness acquired by sages after centuries of worship and penance.

ASHTAVAKRAN: Through my divine sight, I have known that Lord Vishnu himself has been born in the country of Mahakosala as Raman to punish the wicked demons and reestablish Aryavamsam. Oh ultimate soul! Your real form is not unknown to the sages.

RAMAN: I am just a human being. If the great sages attribute divinity to me, I shall consider it as the great fortune of Raghuvamsam.

VASISHTAN: That the form which is both the cause and support of the universe was born to be my disciple is the result of the power of my intense penance.

RISHYASRINGAN: Those endowed with the knowledge of past, present, and future see and know everything.

VASISHTAN: I see before me the way in which you liberated Ahalya and Tataka. I also see you breaking the great bow of Lord Siva and marrying the daughter of the King of Mithila. I see also you putting an end to the wicked arrogance of Parasurama and assimilating into yourself, that great glow of a devotee of Lord Vishnu. I see you killing Bali and vanquishing the great army of demons. Oh, great king! The glow that emanates from a devotee of Lord Vishnu is not unseen by my inner eye.

RAMAN: (*Helpless*) Oh Guru! I am just a worldly human being. A useless wild tree, fallen, scorched in the forest fire of life's sorrows.

VASISHTAN: You may be able to fool the ignorant people, great soul, but that is no reason to speak ill of yourself. Nor is there any need to break the code of ethics.

RAMAN: Have I broken the code of ethics?

VASISHTAN: Why wasn't Sambooka, who is not an Aryan spared? Why did the Aryan, Ramachandran forgive that sudran?

RAMAN: Oh, pardon great Sage, I knew that Sambooka deserved to be killed. But, his wife fell at my feet imploring me to kill her instead. She craved the compassion of the ruler of Ayodhya.

URMILA: The compassion of King Raman!

VASISHTAN: King Raman's compassion should actually be the pitiless preservation of justice.

RAMAN: It is true that I did not cut off Sambooka's head. But, I did stop his penance. I also informed him that if he disobeyed this order, the punishment would be the severing of his head.

ASHTAVAKRAN: Suppose that obstinate, mischievous one begins his penance once again?

RAMAN: On that day he will be killed.

VASISHTAN: I still assert that a king's mercy and compassion is the pitiless observation of justice. The welfare of the people is the royal *dharma* of a king. Let my best disciple always remember that. (*To Urmila*) Scholarly daughter! We have come here to discuss some important political matters.

URMILA: Please give me permission to leave. (*Prostrates before everyone respectfully*)

SAGES: Let auspicious things happen to you!

(*Urmila leaves*)

LAKSHMANAN: Let the attendants go away.

(*From both sides of the stage, the attendants exit*)

VASISHTAN: Oh, King Ramachandran! Not only great sages who have realized the nature of Brahman, the subject kings and the people, but even the birds, the beasts, the trees, and the creepers are happy with your rule.

RISHYASRINGAN: The earth has become abundant with grain and money.

ASHTAVAKRAN: Even barren women have become pregnant.

VASISHTAN: The dark shadow of sorrow has disappeared from the face of the earth.

ALL THE SAGES: Begin the Aswamedham[21] as prescribed.

RAMAN: (*Breaking a short silence*) Aswamedham, Oh Sages?

VASISHTAN: What! Raman who killed the king of Lanka and won the whole world—hesitating!

ASHTAVAKRAN: The only deed that remains to be done by King Ramachandran, to absolve all sins and confer every good fortune, is Aswamedham.

RISHYASRINGAN: After all, the whole country of Bhaarata is now under your rule.

RAMAN: Even so, my revered teachers, is it so easy to perform the Aswamedham?

VASISHTAN: Why not?

RAMAN: I have heard that in order to perform the Aswamedham, the *Yajamanan*[22] must be present in the sacrificial hall along with his wife. Oh, teachers, isn't the king of Ayodhya without a wife?

VASISHTAN: A second marriage is allowed for kings.

RAMAN: A second marriage, oh sage? Sita Devi...

RISHYASRINGAN: Varunan, the Lord of rain, sends rain at the required time and worships you with water.[23]

ASHTAVAKRAN: Odorous flowers acquire a fragrance.

ALL THE SAGES: The fame of 'Rama Rajyam' has reached the end of all directions.

VASISHTAN: Rama Rajyam is abundance.

ASHTAVAKRAN: Prosperous too.

RISHYASRINGAN: Replete with good fortune.

ALL THE SAGES: Victory to Rama Rajyam!

(*Off stage the cry 'Victory to Rama Rajyam' rises from many throats, and echoes.*)

VASISHTAN: There, thousands of your subjects are praising Rama Rajyam.

RAMAN: (*Reverently*) Let Ikshwakuvamsam flourish! We are benefiting from the good deeds of our ancestors.

VASISHTAN: In order not to destabilize this consummate glory...

ASHTAVAKRAN: In order to gain immortal good fortune...

VASISHTAN: Taking another wife is also not prohibited for the king.

RAMAN: Are you suggesting that Raman should have more than one wife?

VASISHTAN: Apart from Kausalya, your father had Kaikeyi and Sumitra as his wives.

RAMAN: That curse of Ayodhya is not over even today. On the day of my coronation, I went to live in the forest along with Sita and Lakshmanan. Even though my generous brother, Bharatan gave up his right to kingship and ruled in the name of my *paduka*[24] which he placed on the throne and worshipped, caring for the people's welfare, their tears still flow. My father Dasarathan, attained the other world, burning in the fire of his sorrow. To this day, Ayodhya is not rid of that curse. The Maharani of Ayodhya was banished to the forest. The affectionate Prince Bharatan protested against the order of Sita's banishment to the forest. He gave up the position of heir apparent offered to him, and now lives in the Kekaya kingdom. (*Despondently*) Raghvamsam is without an heir.

VASISHTAN: Do you think King Dasarathan having more than one wife is the reason for all this?

RAMAN: If not, what else?

ASHTAVAKRAN: These are all actually the reasons the great god devised to vanquish the army of demons.

RAMAN: If the son of Dasarathan had not gone to the forest, if Sita was not kept captive in Lanka, wouldn't the Aryan have fought the demon?

RISHYASRINGAN: All this is only a part of the great play of Lord Vishnu who incarnated in Ayodhya in order to preserve dharma.

RAMAN: Are you saying that a second marriage would also be a part of that playful activity?

VASISHTAN: (*Sternly*) Then listen, O King of Raghuvamsam! If the Aswamedham is unavoidable for the welfare and stability of Bhaarata, nothing is an obstruction to the actual rites of sacrifice.

RAMAN: Sita is an obstruction.

ASHTAVAKRAN: Is the great king convinced that Sita is chaste?

RAMAN: She emerged victorious from the test of fire.

ASHTAVAKRAN: A woman who spent a year in Ravanan's *anthapuram*[25], wouldn't she have mastered the skills of sorcery?

RAMAN: Oh Sage!

ASHTAVAKRAN: If you can give up your wife for the welfare of your people, can't you marry again for the same cause?

VASISHTAN: You know very well that the welfare of the people is the only duty of kshatriyas.

RISHYASRINGAN: The glory of Aryavamsam depends on your observance of dharmam.

VASISHTAN: Oh great king, you are the husband of the great Kosala.

RAMAN: (*Defeated*) Oh younger brother, what is your opinion?

LAKSHMANAN: I, who only carry out your orders, what special opinion can I have?

VASISHTAN: Oh, Raghavan, is a second marriage more difficult than leaving your wife?

RISHYASRINGAN: Nothing is difficult for a king.

RAMAN: That is something I have learnt.

ASHTAVAKRAN: A king is not an individual. He has no individuality.

VASISHTAN: A king is the personification of the will of the people. A protector of the welfare of the people. One who establishes the dharma... Doesn't Raja Raman have the courage to fly the victory flag of Aryavamsam?

RAMAN: (*After a brief silence*) Brother! Send messengers to Kekayam and Madhurapuri.... Let Bharatan and Satrugnan come.

LAKSHMANAN: I do not think elder brother Bharatan will come.

RAMAN: Inform him that it is the order of the ruler of Ayodhya.

ASHTAVAKRAN: Would it not be proper to construct the *yagasala*[26] in the Forest Naimisa, on the banks of Gomathi?

VASISHTA: Let the Sage Sunaka be the chief priest. Who is going to lead the sacrificial horse?

LAKSHMANAN: I shall do that.

ASHTAVAKRAN: What about the wife of the Yajamanan of the sacrifice?

VASISHTAN: I see with my divine eye that the ruler of Kasi has a lucky daughter. Prince Lakshmanan, ask the minister to write a letter saying that Vasishtan advises the king of Kasi to come over to Ayodhya with his family and attendants. O Maharajan! Now we only have to see that Ayodhya prepares itself to look festive. Hail the Great King Ramachandran!

ALL SAGES: Hail the Ruler of Ayodhya! Hail Aryavamsam!

(*Raman bows. Sages depart. Raman stares into the distance and stands unmoving. After some time he looks at Lakshmanan compassionately.*)

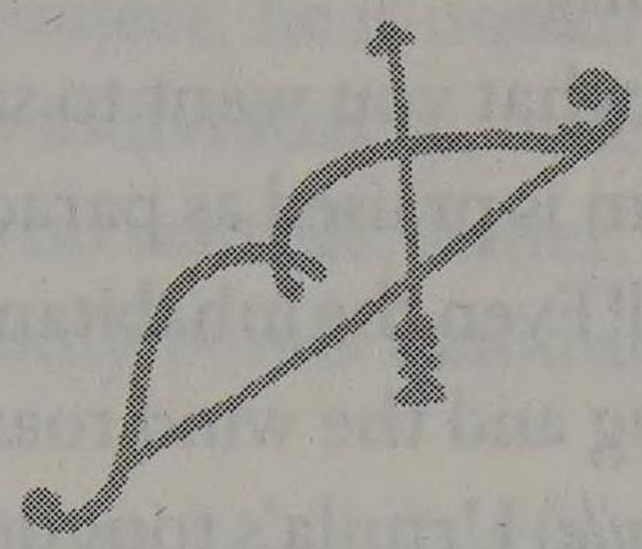
RAMAN: (*To himself*) The memory of Panchavati refuses to fade. (*Losing his equanimity, says to Lakshmanan*) Brother, does the Godavari still flow with all its energy and exuberance?

LAKSHMANAN: Maharajan!

RAMAN: Do you think Raman's hands will move to touch another woman? (*Breaking the silence*) Yes, tell me.... Have you lost your tongue?

LAKSHMANAN: Oh Maharajan!

RAMAN: Maharajan! A synonym for the killer of his own soul.



Act II

(*The city of Ayodhya. The court room. King Ramachandran is seated on the throne. The women attendants fan him with the* venchamaram[1]. *Attendants. Flag holders. Some of the courtiers and Vasishtan sit on wooden seats. Lakshmanan stands. The commander enters.*)

COMMANDER: The messenger reports that his excellency, Prince Satrughnan, has begun his journey from Mathurapuri.

RAMAN: So, my brother set off on our messenger reaching there. What about Prince Bharatan?

COMMANDER: No news received till now.

RAMAN: Could he possibly have disobeyed my orders?

VASISHTAN: It won't surprise me even if he disobeys your orders.

RAMAN: Hmm ... The rocks around the *Prasravanam* mountain in Sugreeva's kingdom has taught me to be hard-hearted.

VASISHTAN: Isn't Prasravanam[2] lofty too?

(*A guard enters*)

GUARD: Her Highness Urmila awaits your orders to present herself.

RAMAN: Ask her to come.

(*The guard goes off. Urmila enters and prostrates*)

URMILA: Oh, Great King!

RAMAN: Let me hear what you want to say.

URMILA: Ramarajayam is praised as paradise on earth.

VASISHTAN: Wonderful! Even the inhabitants of heaven are envious.

URMILA: The birds sing and the wind roars your fame.

RAMAN: (*With a half smile*) Urmila's tongue does not usually stoop to bare-faced flattery.

URMILA: Your virtue is the force behind the prosperity of Ayodhya and the maintenance of dharma. Happiness spills over the boundaries of day and night. Therefore, there is no sorrow either. Worshipping brahmins is your daily ritual. Your subjects' welfare is your *moksham*[3]. You see truth, dharma and beauty in the wishes of your subjects.

VASISHTAN: You have truly interpreted the noblest royal justice.

URMILA: Oh, Great King! Who observes truth like a ritual! If dharma is abused, if justice is violated, you will punish, won't you?

RAMAN: Whether the offender is my mother, wife, or (*pointing to Lakshmanan*) even this youngster, I will punish.

URMILA: Then, why are you not punishing yourself? You who have flung your chaste and pure wife to the mercy of wild animals in the forest, and plans to consort with another woman ?

(*Raman shudders*)

LAKSHMANAN: (*Angrily*) Urmila, this impertinence before the king!

VASISHTAN: (*Calmly*) Child, you are unable to distinguish between the royal dharma and the people's dharma.

LAKSHMANAN: You are actually spoiling the reputation of Videha[4]. You must remember that this is not a credit to the daughter of King Janaka.

URMILA: (*Addressing Lakshmanan*) Aryaputran should not be angry with me. Just as you are devoted to your elder brother, so too, am I, to my sister.

RAMAN: I am aware of that devotion, Urmila. But, the King of

Ayodhya is not a subject, he is not an individual. The King of Ayodhya has no individuality, other than the welfare of the people. He has no mother, father, wife, or sister.... For a king all these worldly bonds amount to one thing.... The will of the people.

URMILA: Didn't you go to the forest at King Dasarathan's behest? Didn't the people protest?

RAMAN: I was not a king at that time, merely a subject of King Dasarathan.

URMILA: Then why did you marry Sita and create a worldly bond?

RAMAN: To be a king one must have a queen.

VASISHTAN: A king should be above suspicion.

RAMAN: In order to be above suspicion, I gave up my better half. Otherwise, it would have corrupted and abused this blessed seat of power. The right path will be shattered. The country will be fragmented.... Aryavamsam will cease to be.

VASISHTAN: In order to fulfil the royal duties he is going to accept another wife.

URMILA: But, oh, great king, in your kingdom, no subject should be unhappy ... isn't that so? Are you not aware of Sita's sorrow?

RAMAN: Sita is not a subject; she is a queen. The king's better half.

URMILA: Even if you accept the Princess of Kasi...

VASISHTAN: Daughter! How can a scholarly person like you have such undignified thoughts?

LAKSHMANAN: She is insulting the royal throne. I find it unbearable.

RAMAN: My brother! Urmila can say whatever she likes to the king. Here, in this court, you have no right to stop her.

LAKSHMANAN: The great king's indulgence prompts her to take the wrong path.

URMILA: No, I know that the tenderness of the royal throne which orders a son or a wife to live in the forest is impermanent.

RAMAN: Urmila! To me, love and tenderness are permitted only up to the boundaries of royal dharma.

URMILA: I understand that the beginning of royal dharma marks the end of love. That's how it has become a synonym for hate. The will of the people may be cruel, against dharma, and lead you along false paths. But, I did not know that royal dharma is cruel.

VASISHTAN: Social dharma may appear cruel to an individual. For the prosperity of many, the individual may have to be consigned to the flames.

URMILA: It's possible that my fate might be just that. Look, my husband who is devoted to his elder brother now stays as your favourite. Who knows whether his end will not be the same as you just described? Isn't it enough if people's will so dictates...

LAKSHMANAN: If the people's will so dictates, it will not distress me.

URMILA: The will of the people! Which is greater, Oh great king! The untruthful will of the people or the truth itself?

RAMAN: Even the truth and untruth of the royal commands is decided by the will of the people.

URMILA: And who decides the will of the people? (*Silence*) Please forgive my impertinence. Enslaved by the cruel thoughts of inferior people you brutalize the truth. Oh king, is there no value for truth in Ayodhya? Aren't you the king? A follower of truth? An observer of dharma? What protection does a chaste and pure woman have in this Ayodhya? If in future a woman's life is unsafe in this Aryavartham, don't forget that you are responsible. Also, don't forget that tomorrow you may be labelled as the one who showed the way for heartless men to drive their wives out.

LAKSHMANAN: (*Furious*) Stop this treason!

RAMAN: *Kumaran*[5], calm down. I can forgive her.

URMILA: (*With a catch in her throat*) You angrily shot an arrow at a crow which did nothing but fly close to Sita. In the wild forest, walking on thorny and stony ground, suffering rain and snow, that pure woman prepared meat for you for thirteen

whole years. At that time, she must have shivered, night and day, hearing the fearful roar of wild animals. She who had lived in the greatest luxury in Videha, did she not trudge along with you, all the way from Ayodhya to the banks of the Godavari, eating forest fruits and whatever meat was available? If anyone occupies the rightful seat of that jewel of chastity—leave alone the Princess of Kasi—even the great Mahalakshmi will go up in flames. This royal seat will scorch her. This is where Sita sat.

RAMAN: Urmila!

URMILA: What will you tell respected Hanuman, who was in every way responsible for your amazing victories? Suppose some day that great one comes here? Do you remember what that messenger reported to you after he leapt across the ocean and found Sita? Today, can you recall the portrait of the goddess of sorrow that he described? She, who sat in the garden of Asoka, under the Simsapa[6] tree?

VASISHTAN: What can we do? A Yajamanan without a wife is not destined to perform the Aswamedham. Daughter, nor can we give up the results that will certainly accrue from the performance of such rituals.

URMILA: Long ago, didn't elder brother Bharatan go to the forest, accompanied by all the soldiers and subjects, and beg his elder brother to come back? Begging and pleading for forgiveness for his father's thoughtless act? On that day, even the peaks of the mountain, *Chitrakootam*[7] were amazed at that act of magnitude. Maharajan! In the same manner, you too must go and call her back.... You must have heard that Sita is living in Valmiki's hermitage. You must beg forgiveness of that jewel among chaste women. Not just you, the ruler of Ayodhya, but the entire country of Ayodhya.

LAKSHMANAN: Hai!

VASISHTAN: Daughter, your indiscretion is no adornment to you.

RAMAN: Sister, there is no need for you to advise the ruler of Ayodhya on *Rajadharmam*[8]. I respect your love for your sister. But that love does not give you the right to advise me. The grandeur of a royal court should not be forgotten even by small children.

URMILA: Please forgive me.

RAMAN: I do not have to explain my love to you ... you who are Sita's sister ... or a woman who understands the inner meanings of human behaviour. (*Controlling his emotions*) Even though I have lost a wife—who was a part of me—that I have a sister who is like a daughter is a consolation.

URMILA: (*Deeply touched*) Maharajan!

RAMAN: Even though you have lost your sister, can't you console yourself that you have a deeply affectionate brother?

(*The guard enters and announces 'The Queen Mother, Kausalya Devi'.*)

RAMAN: Mother? Ask her to come in.

(*The guard goes off. A woman servant enters with a flag and announces, 'King Dasarathan's wife, Kausalya Devi.' Kausalya enters.*)

RAMAN: Offer mother a seat.

(*Woman attendant pulls out a seat*)

KAUSALYA: (*Approaching the seat*) Son, may you live long! Guru! My salutations to you!

VASISHTAN: May you be blessed with auspicious happenings, Oh, mother of brave sons!

KAUSALYA: Son, who is the wife of the Yajamanan?

VASISHTAN: A note has been sent to the King of Kasi.

KAUSALYA: Oh, Guru! You must forgive this woman whose knowledge is limited. Isn't the Aswamedham permitted only to people who have done good deeds?

VASISHTAN: Wrongdoers are not permitted to do any yagam.

KAUSALYA: Does the Aswamedham redeem the Yajamanan from the results of bad deeds?

VASISHTAN: No.

KAUSALYA: Oh great King, Ramachandran! You should not marry again. This is the wish of King Dasarathan's queen.

RAMAN: Mother!

VASISHTAN: Devi! You do not have the right to order him.

KAUSALYA: Dasarathan's wife is aware of that. It is something she already knows. She has also seen Ayodhya gripped by a curse. This is just Kausalya's wish.

RAMAN: (*Rising from his seat and approaching his mother*) Mother! (*Helplessly*) Mother, your son is the ruler of Ayodhya.

KAUSALYA: My husband too was the ruler of Ayodhya. At least in future, let the rulers of Ayodhya be freed of women's curses. (*Exits abruptly*)

(*Raman returns slowly to his seat. There is silence for a few minutes. The royal court is frozen. Even the movement of the chamaram-whisks ceases.*)

VASISHTAN: (*A little later*) Daughter! Please go and console mother.

URMILA: May I leave now?

RAMAN: It is not that mother is unaware that royal justice is impervious. (*After some time*) Talk to mother and console her. (*Urmila bows and retires*) Kulaguru! (*Sighing deeply*) Will I succeed in this ordeal?

VASISHTAN: Oh, great king! A moment's irresolution may shatter a clan. A real king is one who is never in the throes of any irresolution. Can Ramachandran who crossed the great forests of central Bhaarata, built a great bridge and reduced Lanka to ashes be defeated in such an inconsequential test? Ikshwakuvamsam has only seen the progress of Aryans. The ultimate victory of Aryavamsam depends on Ramachandran, the pride of Ayodhya. I shall go and console the Queen Mother. Kausalya, wife of Dasarathan, is not a fickle woman. (*Exits*)

RAMAN: Brother!

LAKSHMANAN: Atiyan[9].

RAMAN: The serene peace of Dandaka forest comes to an end on the shores of the Ganga. Stones and thorns are found not in the forest, but in Ayodhya.

(*Off stage the cries 'Victory to Prince Bharatan!' 'May the just Bharatan live for ever!' rise from many throats.*)

RAMAN: Bharatan has come! (*Shedding tears of joy*) Commander, go and welcome Bharatan with all honours. (*Commander goes*) I doubted whether he would come.

LAKSHMANAN: Elder brother may have a quick temper. But, he would never disobey orders, great king!

RAMAN: Younger brother, I am a prisoner before Bharatan—he has bound me to him through his love and sacrifice. I still remember his visit to Chitrakootam. When I told him that I would not return to Ayodhya before fourteen years were over, my beloved brother wept in desolation. He kept my footwear on his head and returned with tear-filled eyes. That worship with tears came to an end only on the day when we returned. Compared to the sacrifice that he made, brother, how insignificant are we! Mother Kaikeyi who made our father promise the kingdom to him and forest life to me was a naïve woman. She did not realize that her son was greater than that kingdom.

LAKSHMANAN: The royal palaces of Aryavamsam will never be corrupted through rivalries for gaining power. This sacrifice will be a precedent for them.

RAMAN: He is an amazing diamond who re-created Aryavamsam. I respect him. (*Thoughtfully*) Will he be angry with me?

LAKSHMANAN: Doesn't elder brother know the rules of royal justice?

RAMAN: I do not know as much as he knows. But, that short-tempered fellow is not wary of rejecting the advice given by

teachers. The banishment I ordered for Sita made him blind with fury. Twelve years have gone by, after he left us on that day disagreeing with me. He flung aside the heir apparency I offered him. (*Happily*) Still, he did not disobey my order to report for the Aswamedham.

LAKSHMANAN: Maharajan! I envy Bharatan's devotion to his elder brother.

RAMAN: Today, Ayodhya is blessed. But, Kumaran, if he loses his temper with me...

(*The guard enters and announces, 'Prince Bharatan waits to see you'*)

RAMAN: Bring my brother in.

(*The guard goes off. A woman attendant holding a spear enters and moves aside after announcing 'Prince Bharatan'. Bharatan enters. A kingly man with a proud but peaceful face. Bharatan bows respectfully to his brother and stands apart. For a short while there is a silence packed with emotion. Raman gets up slowly from his seat, approaches Bharatan, and embraces him emotionally. Both of them have tears in their eyes. Lakshmanan and the courtiers who are watching also weep.*)

RAMAN: Younger brother!

BHARATAN: Yes, my Lord.

RAMAN: How was this separation possible for you, *Unni*,[10] for twelve years?

BHARATAN: (*Bowing his head*) The pangs of sorrow arising from separation are not unknown to you.

RAMAN: Unni, your elder brother is not without emotions.

BHARATAN: This admission makes me happy. For fourteen years, I treasured your footwear worshipped with tears. The next twelve years, I held that footwear in my imagination and did the same ritual. That is all.

RAMAN: (*Once again returning to his seat*) Hope uncle Raja Yudhajith is keeping well?

BHARATAN: Yes, my Lord.

RAMAN: I am eager to see mother, Kaikeyi. Isn't she keeping well? I, her son, am very eager to see her.

BHARATAN: Yes, my Lord.

RAMAN: And what about your mischievous Mandavi.

BHARATAN: (*Bowing his head*) Yes, my Lord.

RAMAN: She was an adornment to Ayodhya. But, even she does not love Ayodhya any more.

BHARATAN: Hiding the sun, why lament over the glow-worm? Maharajan! Obeying your orders, I have come here. This slave is waiting to fulfil your orders.

RAMAN: Ruling a country is very different from indulging in poetic imagination. Let that be. I have decided to start the preparatory austerities to perform the Aswamedham. You are in charge of the arrangements for the *yagam*.[11]

BHARATAN: May Ikshwakuvamsam flourish in all its excellence! Oh great king! The wife of the Yajamanan?...

RAMAN: That I leave to the advice of the Kulaguru.

LAKSHMANAN: The King of Kasi along with his attendants is coming.

BHARATAN: (*Trying to control his boiling anger*) So, the kshatriya has subjugated himself completely, has he?

RAMAN: Younger brother!

BHARATAN: Fought wars. Conquered several places. In the end, submitted everything to the Brahmin who has mastered tricks, ... everything ... even one's own soul.

RAMAN: The young prince should not forget that the excellence of the Aryans comes from the victory of those tricks.

BHARATAN: Who is the leader of Aryavamsam? A brahmin or a kshatriya? Aryavamsam did not spread itself from Gandhara[12] to Lanka by using tree barks and *manthras*[13]. It was done by shedding the blood of kshatriyas in all the five rivers.

RAMAN: Listening to the chant of sacred verses, by Vasishtan and Bharadwajan, Ganga and Godavari turned into holy rivers.

It is bathing in those sacred rivers that made Aryans powerful leaders. Wasn't it Agasthyan who discovered that beyond the great forests in the south there are people and habitations?

BHARATAN: Reciting the Vedas, chanting and meditation are not impossible for anyone. After all, Rajarshi Viswamitran is not an exception, is he? You have seen for yourself the power of the demon King Ravanan's penance. All those accomplishments are equally possible even for demons. Still, learning the Vedas and performing of penance have been denied even to kshatriyan Aryans. The kshatriyans themselves are slavishly assisting the upholding of the law that the brahmins created against the kshatriyans. Oh, great king, has the king become a servant of the priest?

RAMAN: Yes, a servant of *Brahmagnanam*[14]. A brahmin is one who has attained the knowledge of the Brahman. And that knowledge of the Brahman is the weapon of Aryavamsam. Who gave us the strength to conquer the power of the demons and Lanka lying beyond a thousand miles? The glory of Vishnu has been attained only by Aryans who have mastered the Vedas. Don't you understand that Aryavamsam will be crushed if we abuse the essence of the Vedas?

BHARATAN: I have not moved closely with the sages. Nor have I understood life's deeper principles. Still, I have lived my life. I have also seen life. With your sacred footwear as witness, I have protected the life of Ayodhya. I do not know the various interpretations of truth. But, I know what truth is.

RAMAN: The royal truth is the welfare of the people.

BHARATAN: The will of the people is not the truth, is it?

RAMAN: Isn't welfare the fulfilment of the will?

BHARATAN: But what if the will is varied? Different from one another? Your stay in the forest was at whose will?

RAMAN: The people wished to fulfil the promise made by King Dasarathan.

BHARATAN: It was the same group of people who came to see you, following me, shedding tears, walking through forest and difficult terrain. Has the great king forgotten that? Who willed the order that banished the great queen?

RAMAN: Doesn't the young prince who was the appointed heir apparent at that time remember what happened?

BHARATAN: I have not forgotten. It is true that *some* secret spies reported that *some* people had doubts about the great queen's chastity. Even so, your excellency, how can that be considered the will of the people? How can the will of one or two or even a thousand be deemed the will of all the people? Isn't the single-throated will of the subjects in effect the will of the people?

RAMAN: Who will decide what is against that will?

BHARATAN: No one can decide that. That is why the will of the people becomes a synonym for the will of the king. A king is the reflection of his people.

RAMAN: Then, the banishment order was the will of the king.

BHARATAN: This admission after twelve years. But, Maharajan, that was not the will of the king, it is merely the will of Raman. I have heard that you ordered that jewel among chaste women to go off with Sugreevan. You cursed her, you abused her, finally, having no other alternative, that pure woman jumped into the pit of fire. People like me knew even then, that the banishment order was Raman's will. Forgive me, king! I ask the same question that I asked twelve years ago. Do you think that Sita Devi is chaste?

RAMAN: She was victorious in the test of fire.

BHARATAN: The same reply again, today. Even then, the people had doubts. So, you will say that's why I gave her up.

RAMAN: That is the truth.

BHARATAN: The truth is not just that, O, king! If they had doubts—

why? Did the people of Ayodhya demand that that young woman be dragged through the forest? There were Kosalam and Videham to protect that princess. Urmila stayed in this palace those fourteen years. Why did you take that young girl to the deep forests full of roaring wild beasts? You knew that there would be forest dwellers and demons...

RAMAN: Wasn't that what Sita wished, brother?

BHARATAN: After taking her there, why didn't you protect that young girl? What right did you have to leave the future queen of Ayodhya alone, without a companion? (*Pointing to Lakshmanan*) Who gave you the right to leave her with this man who cared more for the protection of Raman than of Sita? Did you think that by killing Khara and Dushana, the entire clan of demons had been extinguished? Were you not aware that other vengeful demons were waiting, hidden all around? Throwing her into the midst of demons, and later accusing her of a stranger's touch, is it just? O, king! The context and opportunity that led to doubt was created by you. The first to doubt her was you. The punishment based on doubt was issued by you.

RAMAN: Young prince, if you were in my place what would *you* have done?

BHARATAN: The answer to the throats that hurl insults at a chaste and pure woman and accuse her of being a prostitute will be given by my sword, not by me. Be it my wife or another person's wife...

RAMAN: Kumaran! Our swords are not for slicing Ayodhya's throat.

BHARATAN: If the whole of Ayodhya demands the fulfilment of *adharmam*[15], I have the shores of Godavari to go to. There will be fruits and roots to satisfy my hunger. For you also, that way of life is not unfamiliar.

RAMAN: The meaning that you give to royal dharma is unacceptable to me. We both had the same teacher and learnt the same things. But we adopted different ways.

BHARATAN: Probably. Please give me permission to go back.

RAMAN: (*Rising anxiously*) Brother!

BHARATAN: Yes, my Lord.

(*A few minutes silence. Vasishtan enters*)

BHARATAN: Respected teacher, my salutations to you!

VASISHTAN: May you live long!

BHARATAN: I do not wish for that blessing. Oh, Guru, Why should this cursed life be prolonged purely to witness adharmam?

VASISHTAN: Is it possible that Bharatan has not matured even now?

BHARATAN: If the meaning you ascribe to maturity is slavery to brahmins, Bharatan does not wish to have it.

RAMAN: Bharatan!

BHARATAN: Yes, your excellency!

RAMAN: Remember, that this is King Ramachandran's court. Whoever abuses the Kulaguru, be it anyone.... I have no compassion when it comes to observance of dharma.

BHARATAN: Bharatan's tongue is a cursed one, king! This tongue has abused even our revered father who attained heaven. A tongue which has reproached my own mother. I now have to oppose my elder brother also. I've even abused the Kulaguru. Let me have the honour of having abused my elders. Maharajan! Please bid me farewell.

RAMAN: Where to?

BHARATAN: To a country or a forest where adharmam will not be supported. If there is no such place, then to the other world.

RAMAN: What about the responsibility of making arrangements for the Aswamedham?

BHARATAN: Why should I, your slave, be a witness to that adharmam also?

RAMAN: So, have you decided to defy my order?

BHARATAN: Bharatan has never obeyed anyone blindly. Had I obeyed, then your footwear would not have ruled this Ayodhya for fourteen years. Neither would you have had a chance to give an order such as this.... Bharatan is obedient only to the orders of truth.

RAMAN: Won't you cooperate in my yagam?

BHARATAN: No, king! You won't even have to perform the yagam; if Bharatan lives, your sacrificial horse will not return.

RAMAN: (*Jumps up angrily*) You will seize and tie up the sacrificial horse?

BHARATAN: I will.

RAMAN: (*Roars*) Bharatan!

VASISHTAN: Oh, child!

BHARATAN: Bharatan has the strength to seize and tie up the sacrificial horse sent by a king who follows the path of adharmam.

RAMAN: This is Ayodhya.

VASISHTAN: Has the Aryavamsam's famed reputation ended, my great disciples?

BHARATAN: We don't need adharmam to preserve Aryavamsam's good reputation. (*To the king*) You are proud that you have conquered the whole world. But, Bharatan does not accept the victory of a king who does not fulfil his royal dharma. Bharatan will seize the sacrificial horse. If you think you can, fight and regain the horse.

RAMAN: (*Affectionately*) Brother, do not be impetuous. Do not put to test the compassion and patience of the ruler of Ayodhya. You are dearer to me than my life. (*Pauses as though thinking of something*) But, the young prince forgets that I will give up everything for the undying prosperity of Aryavamsam.

VASISHTAN: Is it fair to subject Ikshwakuvamsam to the sin of conflict between brothers?

BHARATAN: There is no conflict between the elder and younger brothers. Ramachandran is like a father to Bharatan.

(*Emotionally*) Have you not known that? Oh, Guru! Don't the courtiers know that? This is the conflict between dharmam and adharmam. For Bharatan, dharmam was more important than his father, Dasarathan. For the same Bharatan, dharmam is more important than his revered elder brother.

VASISHTAN: I was boastfully proud that Ayodhya had four pillars. Even your father, while he was breathing his last consoled himself with that thought. The creator had not planned just three children to three mothers.

LAKSHMANAN: (*Falling at Bharatan's feet*) Elder brother! Are you going to fight a battle with Raman, conqueror of Ravanan?

BHARATAN: Please get up, younger brother. I have the protective armour of dharmam.

RAMAN: (*In a pleading voice*) Won't you obey my orders?

BHARATAN: I will only accept the order of dharmam.

RAMAN: (*Controlling himself and adopting a calm demeanour*) Commander, arrest Bharatan.

COMMANDER: (*Sobbing wildly*) Me, Maharajan! Instead, please give me the death punishment.

RAMAN: (*Furiously*) The ruler of Ayodhya orders.

(*Commander sobs and goes near Bharatan*)

BHARATAN: But, Maharajan! I am the brave kshatriya who defies Ramachandran who is proud of the fact that he has conquered all the worlds. You have to face me in a battle. Not by making the commander imprison me when I least expect it. Are you forgetting the dharmam of a kshatriya?

LAKSHMANAN: Elder brother!

VASISHTAN: Bharatan!

BHARATAN: Unsheath that sword. (*Takes out his sword*)

RAMAN: (*Getting up from his seat, shield in hand, approaches Bharatan*) Child, I do not need any weapons to fight with you... You may begin...

BHARATAN: Do not for a moment think that Bharatan will fight with an unarmed opponent.... Unsheath your sword!

RAMAN: (*Exhausted*) Guru!

VASISHTAN: If blood is the offering for justice, let it be anybody's blood. Rajan! Unsheathe your sword. This alone is kshtariya dharmam.

RAMAN: (*Pressing his hand on the handle of the sword, tenderly*) My beloved brother! (*Then, seeing no change in Bharatan*) Let the world know that Raman who gave up Sita is capable of sacrificing everything. (*Unsheathes his sword*)

LAKSHMANAN: (*Kneeling in front of Raman*) Elder brother! If Ayodhya is thirsting for the blood of brave warriors, here, you may have this younger brother's neck. Let both the swords fall at the same time on my neck.

(*Suddenly Kausalya enters. Seeing Raman and Bharatan with raised swords*)

KAUSALYA: Children, Bharatan!

(*Bharatan prostrates before Kausalya*)

Dasarathan's wife orders you ... put that sword back in its sheath.

BHARATAN: (*Sorrowful*) Mother!

KAUSALYA: You are not the king. So, you can obey your mother. Come on ... put it back in the sheath.... Won't you do it at least to prove this mother's maternal rights?

(*Bharatan replaces his sword in the sheath*)

Haven't I told you, children, that an elder brother is equal to a father? Prostrate fully before your elder brother. (*Bharatan obediently prostrates before Raman*) The throne of Ikshwaku is not for you children to fight over. Remember that.

(*Kausalya goes off. Bharatan gets up and stands as if carved in granite. After a while*)

BHARATAN: Oh, king! Please allow me to leave.

RAMAN: Prince, for the time being go to the rest house and take rest. I shall let you know of my decision later.

(*Bharatan bows and retires*)

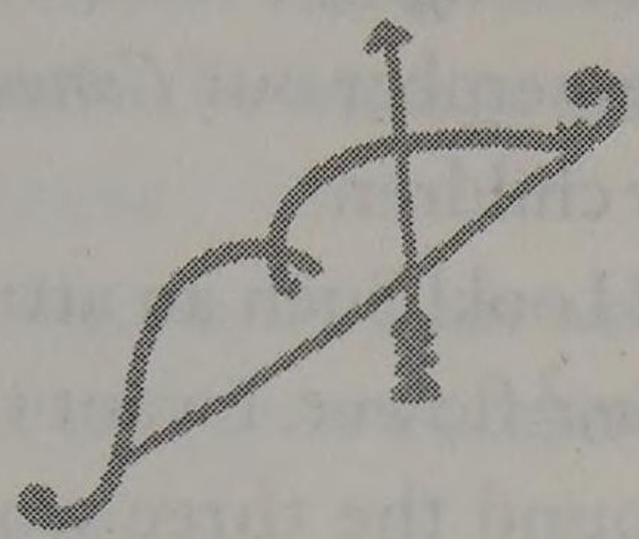
Oh Guru! Let me meditate alone for some time. The court is disbursed.

VASISHTAN: May King Ramachandran be victorious!

RAMAN: Please let me receive your advice without delay.

(*Vasishtan goes off. The courtiers too depart one by one silently. Lakshmanan alone remains.*)

RAMAN: Young prince! Is it possible that Ramarajyam is just an illusion?



Act III

(The grove next to Valmiki's hermitage. Two young ascetics—Kusan and Lavan—are having a heated argument. Though in clothes suited to a hermitage, the bows and arrows they carry and the glowing courage on their faces proclaim that they are not ordinary young ascetics.)

KUSAN: Lavan, that is a sacrificial horse. We do not have the right to tie it up.

LAVAN: What is a sacrificial horse doing in a hermitage?

KUSAN: Isn't it a horse that has succeeded in conquering the world? It can go anywhere.

LAVAN: Then, it can also be seized.

KUSAN: We would be defying the emperor who is performing the Aswamedham. There, can't you see? Near the grove camps a full-fledged army, of elephants, horses, and men at arms. That army must have a fierce leader. We would have to fight with them.

LAVAN: Is that all? (*Drawing an arrow from the quiver*) I am ready.

KUSAN: To fight with that army?

LAVAN: I am strong enough to face them. If you, my elder brother, are scared, you may go.

KUSAN: Scared? Me? For a fight, I too have arrows in my quiver. But, don't you remember our *Gurunathan*[1] telling us that we are not ordinary children?

LAVAN: Elder brother! Look! Such an attractive horse! The same colour as a *mandara*[2] flower. I want this horse. I will mount it and travel around the three worlds. I want to see the Ayodhya which is described in our Guru's poem. I want to touch the nose of Kaikeyi, who sent Raman to the forest on his coronation day, (*Touching Kusan's nose*) like this.

KUSAN: I shall go and report to Guru.

LAVAN: Sure, please go and tell him. The great Guru has always told me that he will give me a horse.

KUSAN: Then, I will tell mother.

LAVAN: Mother will now be (*Pretending to meditate*) immersed in meditation like this. If you go and tell her she won't hear you.

KUSAN: It is a sacrificial horse, not a plaything.

LAVAN: If it is not a plaything, let them come, untie it and take it away.

KUSAN: The soldiers accompanying the horse would have by now informed the commander.

LAVAN: Elder brother, please go and stay in the hermitage. I shall take care of this.

KUSAN: Then, I shall go and bring mother this instant. (*Exits*)

(*Someone approaches from the opposite side, upon seeing whom Lavan takes an arrow from his quiver. The commander enters.*)

COMMANDER: Child, Who are you?

LAVAN: Valmiki's disciple, Lavan. And who are you?

COMMANDER: I am the commander of the army of King Ramachandran, who is the leader of Raghuvamsam.

LAVAN: In fact, I have heard a great deal about him.

COMMANDER: Why did you tie up the horse? Don't you know that

it is the sacrificial horse? The soldiers forgave you as this is an area around Valmiki's hermitage and it was the thoughtless act of a young ascetic.

LAVAN: I am not a young ascetic. I am wearing this dress because I live in the hermitage. I am a kshatriya prince. I do not wish to be forgiven by you.

COMMANDER: (*With a smile*) Child, this is not a playful matter. Return the horse. Remember that it is the commander from Ayodhya who stands before you.

LAVAN: Even if you were King Ramachandran himself, I am not scared. Nor am I prepared to give the horse back. It has upset the peace of the hermitage. So, I have siezed it. Go and tell King Ramachandran to come and retrieve it if he has the courage.

COMMANDER: (*Bursting into laughter*) King Ramachandran who conquered Ravanan? You are indeed very smart. You don't have the strength to face even one soldier from his army.

LAVAN: Oh, Ramachandran is so extraordinarily valourous, is he? My great Guru, in his poem has described, how, hidden, he aimed the arrow that killed Bali.

COMMANDER: Child! Are you insulting the great King Ramachandran who fought and won a war against the demon army?

LAVAN: Who fought the war? Was it not Hanuman and his army of monkeys? If I have with me a great hero like Hanuman, I can fight and conquer this whole world.

COMMANDER: Aryavartham used to shudder on hearing the name of Ravanan. It is that Ravanan who was killed by this descendant of Ikshwakuvamsam. Hasn't your Guru told you all those stories?

LAVAN: I have heard the whole story; in fact, studied it too. Wasn't Ravanan killed only after his meditation in the sacrificial centre at *Nikumbhila*[3] was disturbed? And that too after stealthily entering and disturbing his meditation?

COMMANDER: How can I reply to you who are as tender as a creeper?

No one has dared to insult the ruler of Ayodhya in the presence of the commander of Ayodhya.

LAVAN: Am I asking for your compassion? I am a kshatriya, who has mastered archery.

COMMANDER: I do not have time to tarry. Child, give the horse back to me.

LAVAN: No, I won't. Go and report to King Ramachandran that a brave kshatriyan has siezed his sacrificial horse. Inform him that his conquest of the world is, therefore, not complete.

COMMANDER: Do not try my patience. (*Taking an arrow from the quiver*) Won't you give the horse?

LAVAN: Do not string the bow. I do not wish to kill a commander.

COMMANDER: Doesn't this mischievous boy know what fear is?

LAVAN: (*Brimming with bravery*) Are you a kshatriya?

COMMANDER: If I am not?

LAVAN: If you are not, tell me who else has come to fight with this brave kshatriyan who has siezed the sacrificial horse?

COMMANDER: (*Laughing*) You will shudder on hearing his name.

LAVAN: Lavan is not scared of anyone except his mother and Gurunathan. Who is it?

COMMANDER: The Heir Apparent, Prince Lakshmanan.

LAVAN: (*Happily*) The brave warrior who killed Indrajith? Ask him to come.

COMMANDER: (*Laughing heartily*) Child! I admit defeat and give up.... Had we known that there was such a mad child in Sage Valmiki's hermitage, we might have taken another route.

LAVAN: If you hide and run away, can it be deemed the conquest of the world? Go and bring the Heir Apparent. If he doesn't come I won't return the horse.

COMMANDER: Child! I have never been so amused in my whole life. Since I am close to the hermitage, I am not in a position to ignore you also. (*Turns and walks*) Look, the Heir Apparent himself is coming over this way. He must be coming to pay his respects to Valmiki.

(*Lakshmanan enters. He stops, taken aback, on seeing Lavan.*)

LAKSHMANAN: Young boy! Who are you?

LAVAN: Valmiki's disciple, Lavan.

LAKSHMANAN: Your mother?

LAVAN: An ascetic of the hermitage.

LAKSHMANAN: What is the name of that ascetic?

LAVAN: The inhabitants of the hermitage call her Devi.

LAKSHMANAN: (*Eyes welling*) Your father?

LAVAN: That is a secret ... known only to my revered Guru and mother ... I only know that we are kshatriya princes.

LAKSHMANAN: We...?

LAVAN: There are two of us; Kusan and myself.

LAKSHMANAN: (*Becoming emotional*) Young prince, come over here. (*Arms outstretched*) May I give you a kiss? (*Seeing that Lavan has not moved, goes near him and places a kiss on his head. Eyes fill with tears.*) Where is Kusan, child?

LAVAN: (*Astonished*) He is in the hermitage.

LAKSHMANAN: I... Do you know who I am, young child?

LAVAN: I have heard of you. I am happy to fight you!

LAKSHMANAN: (*In wonder*) What? A fight?

COMMANDER: This mischievous lad has tied up the sacrificial horse.

LAKSHMANAN: (*Surprised, happy, and taken aback*) You have seized the sacrificial horse?... Brave prince! Don't you know that it is the sacrificial horse of the great King Ramachandran?

LAVAN: A kshatriyan has the right, hasn't he?

LAKSHMANAN: Yes ... but ...

LAVAN: I too have learnt the art of archery. You may put it to test.

LAKSHMANAN: I have no doubt about your skills. I have watched my elder brother killing Tataka[4] and defeating Parasuraman[5] at your age. But.... Unni!

LAVAN: Why are you, a brave kshatriyan hesitating? Hm.... String your bow.... My patience is wearing thin. Though I have learnt archery, I have never used it.... I am yearning to try it.

LAKSHMANAN: (*Sounding tired*) You have to aim your very first arrow at me... Unni! How can I fight with you?

LAVAN: Just now, you yourself mentioned the story of your elder brother fighting with the revered and old, Parasuraman. You will have no more doubts when you are defeated.

LAKSHMANAN: You are placing me in a dilemma.

LAVAN: All right. Then, don't fight. Let the sacrificial horse stay here.

LAKSHMANAN: King Ramachandran's sacrificial horse? Don't you know that it has to reach Ayodhya before the Aswamedham is completed.

LAVAN: Then I shall suggest another strategy. Let the great King Ramachandran himself come.... He may not be as discomfited as you. Tell him he has to face me in a straight fight and not hide behind a tree and aim arrows.

LAKSHMANAN: Unni, who taught you all these stories about Raman?

LAVAN: My revered Guru himself. We have memorized the poem that he wrote.

LAKSHMANAN: Hasn't he taught you that it is your dharmam to respect King Ramachandran?

LAVAN: I do respect the king ...

LAKSHMANAN: Still, why do you defy Ramachandran?

LAVAN: This is not defiance.... It is the dharmam of kshatriyas. Doesn't sending the sacrificial horse to conquer the whole world imply complete submission to the king, and not just respecting him? I can submit only when I am convinced that he is stronger than me. How can we decide that without a war?

COMMANDER: Young Prince! That child will not submit without your drawing your weapon.

LAKSHMANAN: (*Tenderly*) Won't the young Prince give the horse without a fight?

LAVAN: No.

LAKSHMANAN: Are you sure?

LAVAN: Yes.

LAKSHMANAN: Then be prepared to shoot arrows. I shall not shoot, but only stop the arrows you shoot at me.

LAVAN: The Heir Apparent! You do not have the strength to stop my arrows.

LAKSHMANAN: (*Weeping with joy and choking*) In that case, Unni, you can consider yourself the victor?

LAVAN: Isn't it your duty to protect the sacrificial horse?

LAKSHMANAN: Unni, you shoot your arrow.

LAVAN: Then, if you have the strength, stop it.

(*Lavan strings the bow and prepares to shoot the arrow. Lakshmanan stands smiling tenderly. In the background the sound of bells ringing and the conch being blown.... The sound made by approaching wooden sandals on the ground. Sage Valmiki enters in a rush.*)

VALMIKI: Unni! Do not be rash. Withdraw that arrow.

(*Lavan places the arrow back in his quiver. Lakshmanan greets Valmiki respectfully.*)

LAKSHMANAN: I am Lakshmanan, the Heir Apparent to Ayodhya. Please bless me.

VALMIKI: May you have a long life! (*To Lavan*) Prostrate before the young prince. Who advised you, Unni, to shoot the arrow at Prince Lakshmanan?

LAVAN: Oh, Guru! I asked him to fight and recapture the sacrificial horse.

VALMIKI: Sacrificial horse?

LAKSHMANAN: King Ramachandran has begun the Aswamedhayagam.

COMMANDER: This young boy has siezed the sacrificial horse.

VALMIKI: Unni, have you siezed the sacrificial horse of King Ramachandran? And, besides that you shot an arrow at Prince Lakshmanan? Am I right? Free the sacrificial horse! You do not have the right to sieze the sacrificial horse of King Ramachandran.

LAVAN: Doesn't a kshatriyan have the right to do that?

VALMIKI: Unni, Do you have a kingdom? Has the sacrificial horse entered your country? Has it? No....

LAVAN: Gurunathan, please forgive me.

VALMIKI: Mischevous one! Untie the horse ...

(*Lavan prostrates before the sage, gets up and goes off.*)

LAKSHMANAN: Sage! The lustrous glow emanating from that boy dazzles me; it also saddens me.

VALMIKI: The inner streams of life are hidden from us. They create many beautiful sights.

LAKSHMANAN: Sage! My heart whispers sweetly to me that this prince is the sapling of Raghuvamsam.

VALMIKI: Shouldn't Raghuvamsam decide that?

LAKSHMANAN: That dark and dense forest over there, that was the place where I left Sita on that day.

VALMIKI: So the young prince remembers that, does he?

LAKSHMANAN: This glorious looking prince wakes those memories.

VALMIKI: That forest bloomed twelve times after that. River Ganga flows even now, making the earth a sacred place. Oh, prince, the royal will has no power to upset the life of the universe.

LAKSHMANAN: This hermitage and its surroundings offer new visions to me now ... the good luck to have that vision also exhausts me. Please bless this childless sinner.

VALMIKI: I understand that the sight of Lavan has not only aroused regret, but also tender feelings in you. Never shut your eyes towards human life.... It will reveal new truths.... The curse of chaste women is never a blessing. Let that be.... Aswamedham is indeed befitting to Ramachandran. But, who is the wife of the Yajamanan?

LAKSHMANAN: A golden statue of Sita.

VALMIKI: A metal statue when Sita is alive? Didn't Vasishtan advocate another marriage?

LAKSHMANAN: My elder brother, Bharatan opposed it.

VALMIKI: A brave and principled man! But who advocated the installation of the metal statue?

LAKSHMANAN: In the end, Kulaguru himself advocated it.

VALMIKI: Young Prince, Is the better half of King Ramachandran just metal ... mere lifeless material? Does this mean that even though a wife is invaluable, she should not have any consciousness? A being without any consciousness, or thoughts, an unquestioning, lifeless lump! After all, Ramachandran's heart is also metal, isn't it? Please go and tell the great king what this forest dweller has to say ... even gold melts in the fire...but, Sita cannot be burnt or destroyed even by fire.... The life of Ramachandran, muddied with impurities is not fortunate to relish the divine abundance of that pure and wonderful glow.

LAKSHMANAN: Oh, Sage, please forgive me and be patient.

VALMIKI: Patience lives in that hermitage, close to me. As my daughter; no, as my mother.

LAKSHMANAN: The children of Ramachandran ...

VALMIKI: They have Valmiki as their grandfather.

(*Silence for some time*)

LAKSHMANAN: (*His voice choking*) Oh, Sage! Is Sita Devi comfortable and happy?

VALMIKI: Hm ... what.... Didn't you go away abandoning her on the shores of the Ganga? All the happiness possible in a forest is available to Sita. Yes, Sita is well. She makes even the hermitage purer through her continuous penance. Her life flows at a calm pace savouring the bliss of self-knowledge. What has not abated is the sorrow of humiliation. Sita shines from her own glow like the circle of the sun, whereas Raman without Sita is a mere circle of darkness. Aswamedham gives power,

not release.... Young prince, please come to the hermitage.... The inhabitants of the hermitage will be happy to welcome the representative of the ruler of Ayodhya.

LAKSHMANAN: Oh, Sage! Please forgive me. I lack the courage to even approach Devi's hermitage.

VALMIKI: Even a sinner can go before Sita. Seeing her is a release from sin. Why should Raman perform Aswamedham!

LAKSHMANAN: Oh, Sage! Will Sita forgive me?

VALMIKI: She has forgiven even Raman.

(*Kusan comes running, panting.*)

KUSAN: Guru! Where is Lavan?

(*Lakshmanan looks at Kusan tenderly*)

VALMIKI: Unni, prostrate before the younger brother of King Ramachandran, ruler of Ayodhya.

KUSAN: The Heir Apparent, Lakshmanan.... (*Prostrates. Lakshmanan emotionally kisses Kusan on his head.*)

I have heard that your wife is a great scholar. Is that mother doing well?

LAKSHMANAN: She is, child.

KUSAN: Does the sacrificial horse belong to King Ramachandran?

LAKSHMANAN: Yes.

KUSAN: Mischievous brat! Guru, where is he? Has he released the horse?

VALMIKI: He has gone to untie it.

KUSAN: (*Looking off stage, says loudly*) Mother, he has gone to release it. Guru, let me also go and watch it. (*Bowing to Lakshmanan, goes off*)

LAKSHMANAN: Oh Sage, Devi has already arrived. I do not have the courage to stand before her. (*Sita enters. A divine form. Tired, but her eyes shine. She glows like twilight dressed as an ascetic.*)

Devi! (*Bowing respectfully*)

SITA: Prince Lakshmanan? (*Meditates for some time. A silence filled with emotions. Controlling her emotions, she raises her face.*) Is Aryaputran keeping well?

LAKSHMANAN: Yes, I am your servant.

SITA: I pray for all of you. Is everyone keeping well?

LAKSHMANAN: Yes, I am your servant.

SITA: Prince, are the subjects happy?

LAKSHMANAN: Yes, they are.

SITA: Let me hear all the news. Tell me.

(*Lakshmanan is silent*)

Why are you not saying anything?

LAKSHMANAN: Please forgive this brother who has sinned. I do not have the strength to say anything else.

SITA: You have done nothing wrong. I always weep tears of joy when I think of you, a treasure of love.

LAKSHMANAN: If I had not left Devi alone in that hermitage ...

SITA: Who can prevent the results of karma[6]. Younger brother, please do not grieve. What is destined for Sita is the forest. As a result, I had the fortune to serve the great Guru. Prince, how many children does Urmila have?

LAKSHMANAN: I am a sinner ...

VALMIKI: Prince, let us go to the hermitage.

LAKSHMANAN: The last refuge for this sinner would be some peaceful hermitage. Oh, Sage, permit me to accept your hospitality another time. We have to travel a long way. Devi! Please allow me to go.

SITA: Serve your brother and attain a blessed life. My good wishes to Aryaputran and Ayodhya.

(*Lakshmanan bows respectfully and departs with tears in his eyes.*)

Young Prince!

(*Lakshmanan stops*)

Don't mention that you saw me. It may grieve him.

(*Lakshmanan goes. Sita looks intently at the path Lakshmanan has taken.*)

VALMIKI: Daughter, it is not easy to reach the other shore of the sea of sorrow.

SITA: Your daughter has already begun to see that other shore.

VALMIKI: At times, the whirlwind of memories may blow forcefully.

SITA: May your presence give me courage. (*Prostrates kneeling*)

VALMIKI: The mother of the child who siezes the sacrificial horse of the ruler of Ayodhya is a fortunate woman. Daughter! Who else has that honour in Aryavartham?

SITA: Oh, Guru, who is the wife of the Yajamanan?

VALMIKI: Daughter! How did you know about the rituals of Aswamedham? You are the wife of the Yajamanan. Your statue cast in gold.

SITA: (*With a deep sigh*) May Aryaputran be blessed with auspicious things!

(Off-stage, the sound of the disciples of the sage reciting the Ramayanam is heard as follows.

Manipravarasringagro, Bheetasmitamukhakriti
Kinchidabhyanatagriva Indraneelasiroruha
Kundenduhamsasadrisenodarena virajita
Hemarajata chitrabhyam parswahyamathishobita.

The deer was present, with the tips of its horn bright as gems, its face partly white and partly dark, its neck stretched forward, the lower part of it the colour of a blue lotus, its underside white as the kunda flower, the moon and the swan, and its flanks beautifully adorned with gold and silver spots.

Enter Kusan and Lavan)

LAVAN: Mother, I want a horse like that.

KUSAN: Mother, I too want one.

LAVAN: Mother, have you mounted a horse?

KUSAN: Brother! Don't you know that mother is a kshatriya woman? She must be knowing such things well.

LAVAN: Do you know, mother? Mother! (*Seeing Sita standing immobile*) Mother does not know....

KUSAN: She knows.

LAVAN: She does not.

KUSAN: She knows, don't you, mother? (*Holding mother's chin*) No, mother?

LAVAN: (*Arms around Sita's neck*) You don't know, mother, do you?... Mother's face looks like the dark phase of the moon.[7]

SITA: (*Tear-filled eyes shine with love for her children. Sita smiles. A smile that looks like the full moon rising in a sky filled with black clouds.*) Children! Your mother does not know anything. (*To Lavan*) Little rascal! why did you tie the sacrificial horse?

LAVAN: (*With the glow of a warrior*) I am a kshatriya prince. Should I accept his power, just because he killed a devotee of god in Lanka.

SITA: (*In a composed voice, as though giving an order*) Unni, do not abuse the ruler of Ayodhya.

LAVAN: What, mother?

VALMIKI: (*Till then watching with a smile the children playing, now seriously*) Raman is the sovereign of Aryavamsam. Unni! You should not insult him.

LAVAN: Gurunathan came at the right time. (*Gesturing*) Otherwise, I had strung the bow like this, aimed it, praying like this... If he was late by one minute ... that representative of the ruler of Ayodhya ...

SITA: (*Hand over Lavan's mouth*) Brat!

VALMIKI: Daughter! I plan to go to Ayodhya and will take the children with me. Are you coming?

LAVAN: Can I get a horse there, Oh, Guru!

VALMIKI: I am going.... I have not received an invitation.... But, do mendicants need an invitation? I am going, along with the children ... singing the story of Ramayanam.... Let that song resound in Ayodhya.... In that heavenly sound let the whole universe awake. No, Ramayanam is not over ... It has to travel a long way.... What a wonderful creation is man!

(*In the distance the sound of Valmiki reciting Ramayanam becomes louder and also the ringing of bells.*)

The mysterious and beautiful inner rivers of life fill this old mind with emotions.

(*Lavan and Kusan watch the sage intently and stand still. Sita stands, palms pressed together, looking upwards.*)

Ten thousand streams join a grand flow which then rushes to the heart of the universe. All twilights, all dawns melt and mix into a divine flow, irridiscent and radiant.

(*Off stage sounds of bells and recital of Ramayanam grow louder.*)

The flock of birds create a background of bird song. The forests worship with flowers. Nature watches revealing various emotions. A great journey has begun. This Valmiki is gazing at that journey, wide eyed, like a small child. What types of beauty! Glorious sights! Magnificent scenes! Awakened heavens!

(*The sounds off stage become louder. The great poet Valmiki begins to compose the latter section of Ramayana.*

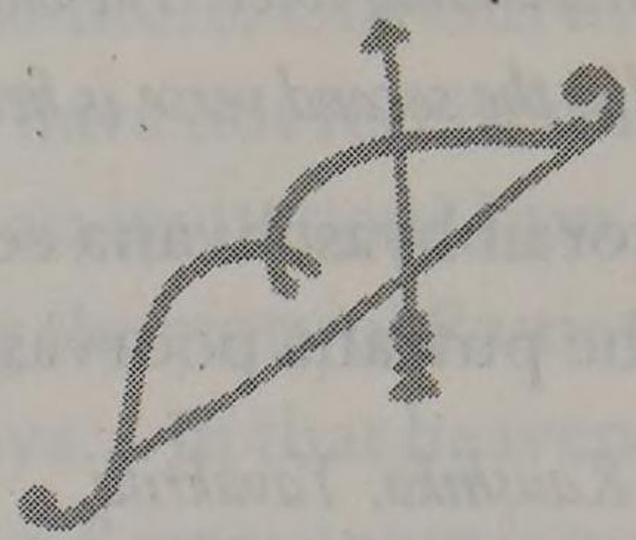
Praptarajasya Ramasya, Rakshasanam Vadhe Krite
Aajagmurmunayassarve Raaghavam Pratinanditum.

When Sriraman regained the kingdom,
after killing the rakshasas
all the sages came to offer
their felicitations to him.

The first verse is recited in a resounding voice. The background sounds also increase in volume. As the curtain falls, the second verse is heard in the background.

Asitothayavakritoraibhyaschvana eeva cha
Kanvo Medhatithe putraha poorvasyam disi samsthitha.

They were all there, Kaushika, Yavakrita,
Gargya, Kanva, the son of Medathithi,
Who resided in the eastern direction.)



Act IV

(Naimisaranyam. The king's hut made of thatch and matting, is next to the sacrificial hall. Maharaja Ramachandran in the royal seat, Vasisthan in another. Satrughnan stands, and a little away from him, Urmila. The attendants or courtiers stand guard.)

RAMAN: I hope our mothers are comfortable in their houses.

URMILA: Yes, my Lord. Only Mother Kausalya is bedridden.... Every now and then she weeps aloud, 'Sita, Sita'.

RAMAN: Who is looking after mother?

URMILA: Mandavi and Srutakeerthi sit close by. I too was there till now.

RAMAN: Hm.... Oh, Guru, Hasn't the sacrificial horse arrived?

VASISTHAN: Maharajan! Do not be anxious.... The sacrificial horse will be here shortly.

(Bharatan enters)

BHARATAN: Maharajan! The front runners have already arrived. The Heir Apparent, Prince Lakshmanan follows, victorious.

VASISTHAN: *(Jumps up from his seat in a rising wave of happiness)* May the Ikshwakuvamsam grow and flourish in all glory!

(*In a single voice the courtiers cry 'May the Ikshwakuvamsam grow and flourish in all glory!'*)

RAMAN: Kumaran, Why is it that you look weary, upon hearing this happy news?

BHARATAN: Maharajan! The work that you entrusted to me is completed. The sacrificial horse has entered Naimisam. The yagam is being performed according to prescribed rituals. The houses for brahmins, the living places of people from other castes, the palaces for kings and the huts for servants—all these are well-maintained. Only a few days to go for the completion of the yagam. So, please permit me to leave.

RAMAN: After completing the yagam, you may go.

BHARATAN: The completion of the yagam does not in any way make me happy. Maharajan! Following the orders of the sovereign of Ayodhya, I undertook the management of the yagasala. That is all.

RAMAN: It is with sorrow that I realize as much. I know even better than you, that your heart does not bless me in this venture.... Kumaran! You may go when the yagam is completed.

BHARATAN: It has been my destiny to praise dharmam and tolerate adharmam. My soul is agitated. Maharajan! My mind whispers to me, 'Do not stay here, don't.' My inner conscience writhes, hinting at a future harmful occurrence. I think the killing that took place at the beginning of the yagam is a bad omen.

RAMAN: Kumaran! Wasn't the killing done according to prescribed custom?

BHARATAN: I have heard that he is a fierce ascetic.

VASISHTAN: He is a dasyu.

RAMAN: A few days earlier, I warned him. At that time, his wife fell at my feet and begged me.... She had even promised that he would not perform penance again. Still, ignoring my order, he began the ritual of penance once again. That too, near this yagasala.

VASISHTAN: Doesn't the young prince know that a brahmin's son died because of Sambooka's penance?

BHARATAN: What a pity! The truth is that the only one who died because of Sambooka's penance is Sambooka himself. That holy man's wife became a widow and I have heard that that faithful woman used to serve Sambooka, in snow, rain, and heat. The power of her chastity may erupt into a tempestuous curse, which will snuff out even the fire of this Aswamedhayagam. In any case, why should I ... I shall not utter a word.... Anything I say may appear to be an insult to you.

VASISHTAN: You are not a rebel, but a compassionate person. You writhe in agony on hearing the beats of a heart. You weep on seeing another person's tears; you abhor seeing blood ... but, even a thief has a heart; a prostitute, tears; an enemy, blood.... Do not forget that. A compassionate person may find it impossible to preserve justice.

BHARATAN: Not me.

VASISTHAN: You have not faced any ordeals.

BHARATAN: If justice is honest, then there are no ordeals. How can a justice which converts an ascetic into a thief, a chaste woman into a prostitute, and a brother into an enemy be truthful? Under such justice a compassionate person will have to face many ordeals ...

VASISTHAN: What is truth ...? How did the ascetic Sambooka turn out to be a thief in the eyes of Ayodhya? It is not that I do not respect Sambooka. I worship with my heart his devotion to penance. Your brother could not sleep on the night he killed Sambooka. But, if we did not punish Sambooka, won't all the dasyus begin to do penance? Won't the dasyu also become powerful and famous like the Aryan? Then how can the Aryan win? Oh, Prince, truth does not submit itself to any one object or event. The truth lies entwined with many things.

BHARATAN: My truth manifests and fulfils itself completely in everything. Oh, Guru! I will not say anything more. I felt that it was an inauspicious beginning to this auspicious event. Please forgive me. Maharajan! Please bid me farewell.

RAMAN: If you do not have the patience to stay on and rejoice at the completion of the Aswamedhayagnam of the ruler of Ayodhya, please go away.

(*Bharatan sits looking thoughtful*)

Aswamedham is capable of vanquishing all sins and offering liberation from all curses. Still, even now, my heart is anxious. All the people who are close to me have arrived. My brother, Sugrivan is here; Vibhishanan too. Still I feel alone. King Raman is being praised. But he is not a sword or an armour. He is just a human being. A common man born on this earth which smiles at the rising sun and feels sad as it sets. Raman, the king too has a heart that weeps when it leaves its nest and wanders around, aimless. At such a time, if you too leave.... Go away. Raman shall stand alone. Till the end.... Only Raman, the human being will die.... Raman, the principle will remain. Go away, you too may go; otherwise, Raman will have to give up Bharatan. You may go. Let me at least not have the sorrow of abandoning you.

BHARATAN: I shall not go.

VASISHTAN: May you be happy!

(*Off-stage a tumultuous sound. A woman's raised voice, 'Do not stop me'. A man asks, 'What business do you have in the presence of the King?' Woman's voice, 'I must see King Raman; No one should stop me.... Doesn't he still hold the sword that killed my husband? I want him to sever my neck too.'*)

RAMAN: (*Listening carefully*) Isn't that the voice of Sambooka's wife?

VASISHTAN: Aren't the soldiers of Ayodhya capable of stopping a sudra woman? Prince Bharatan, can't you?

RAMAN: Why do you want to stop her? Let her come.

VASISHTAN: She will not respect this royal court.

BHARATAN: Any inhabitant of this Mahakosalam is free to see the sovereign of Ayodhya and present her sorrows to him.

RAMAN: Oh, Guru! It is my duty to console her.

VASISHTAN: Maharajan! She has not come seeking consolation, but to insult Ayodhya.

WOMAN: Accursed King! 'You killed one out of this pair of krauncha birds.' The great poet recited these words about you. You are the hunter. Oh King! Do you remember Tara and Mandodari[1] cursing you? Do you also remember the heartbroken sobs of the women of the demon clan? How will you be liberated from those curses? King! Even if you perform a thousand Aswamedhams, will you be free from those curses? Oh King, killer of husbands! You will never have the happiness of living with a wife.

(*Thunder and lightning. The courtiers as well as Raman rise to their feet. The woman's voice continues.*)

You will never gain peace of mind.

(*Silence for some time. From the depths of the forests the distant, distorted and frightening sounds of wild beasts resound and slowly die off.*)

RAMAN: Oh Guru! This is the final ordeal.

VASISHTAN: (*Engrossed in meditation*) The King may have to face greater ordeals. Let the yagam continue without a break.

URMILA: Maharajan! The inner soul of Sita Devi is testing you. Don't you understand? As different moods, it is knocking at the doors of your conscience and awakening you.... At least now can't you open that door?

(*The recital of Ramayanam by Lavan and Kusan can be heard indistinctly. Everyone listens.*)

Listen, that song sounds like a disembodied voice. (*Listening carefully*) The stories of Raman recited by some children.

BHARATAN: They are describing the scenes at Mithila!

VASISHTAN: Yes, Indeed the stories about Raman!

URMILA: Ah! The words that my father said then reverberate now.

(*The songs of the children can now be heard clearly.*)

Here is my dear daughter Sita,
Accept her as your inseparable wife,
She will follow, without fail,
your footsteps, like your shadow.

(*Weeping profusely*) Where, Rajan, is your shadow?

(*The children's song can now be heard in a louder voice.*)

There was an unending rain of flowers,
From the sky came the sound of celestial instruments,
The Gandharvas[2] *and others sang the songs,*
The Apsara[3] *women danced*
All seen on the auspicious wedding day,
of the blessed leader of Raghukula.

VASISHTAN: Whose poem is that? (*To Bharatan*) Go, young prince, find out who wrote that poem.

(*Bharatan goes*)

RAMAN: Why were the poets anxious to sing the story of Raman? Who wants to listen to that sad story?

VASISHTAN: Sad story, Maharajan! It is the story of the victory of Aryavamsam.

(*Enter Kausalya. Though her swollen face reflects an air of despondence, she looks determined.*)

KAUSALYA: Son! Don't you hear that song?

RAMAN: (*Exhausted*) Yes, I hear ...

KAUSALYA: Did you see the young boys who are reciting that song?

RAMAN: No.

KAUSALYA: Two young ascetics ... like two suns jointly rising in the sky.... That song, sweet as nectar, gives a new vigour even to this old invalid woman.... I saw them. (*In a choked voice*) I remember those faces. Son ... go and have a look.... Now those young boys are singing, going round the yagasala.

(*Gradually, the children's singing becomes clear and loud before fading away. What is heard aloud is:*

With their inner hearts always united,
They lived in divine bliss
The chant of Rama's name firmly held
In the heart of that pure woman, Sita
Her nobility had its effect on
the husband chosen by her father,
Her body shone and blossomed
Growing in beauty and goodness
The chaste and pure Sita.

Sita, the chaste and the faithful,
Knew from moment to moment her husband's thoughts,
Maithili Devi, The personification of beauty,
The very incarnation of prosperity.)

Son, who are those young singers? (*Choking*) Are these old eyes deceived?

VASISHTAN: Who are those boys?

KAUSALYA: They wear bark-skin.... Still how can those radiant, warrior-like figures be ascetics? No, Son, no, those children... (*Stops in mid-sentence*)

URMILA: (*Excitedly*) *Tirumeni*[4]! Go and see them ...

KAUSALYA: Perhaps ... the good fortune of Saketam has not declined. (*Lifting her hands as though in blessing*) May it be so. (*Exits suddenly*)

URMILA: Maharajan! Permit this slave to go and see those children, just this once. (*Exits*)

RAMAN: Even mother does not understand this son. No. Desires are betraying the senses. (*Bharatan enters*)

BHARATAN: (*Happily*) My Lord! The Suryavamsam will not perish.

VAISHTAN: (*Gets up with a jump*) What?

RAMAN: Kumaran! Do not let your emotions cloud your intelligence.

(*Urmila enters*)

URMILA: (*Drugged with happiness*) Blessed one! Please go and see those children with your own eyes.... Aren't they my own children ...? Sita .... you are fortunate.... Please command, King! Let me see those children at close quarters.

VASISHTAN: Maharajan! Perhaps this may be the last ordeal. I myself shall go and find out who those children are. (*Exits*)

RAMAN: Who told you that those singers, the children, are Sita's?

URMILA: (*Raising her arm wearily and pointing at Raman*) Here, this blessed face tells me.... True divine images.... Call them and put them on your lap, Tirumeni.... You will attain that release from curses, which no Aswamedham can give you.

RAMAN: Now, Sita is nobody to me.

URMILA: And the children?

RAMAN: They too, if they are Sita's children ...

(*Off-stage, an awe-inspiring voice uttering 'Jaya Sitaram'. Everyone listens. Once again, the chant 'Jaya Sitaram' is heard.*)

RAMAN: Hanuman?

URMILA: (*Sighing with relief*) The devotee who crossed the ocean and found Sita!

RAMAN: (*Anxiously*) Even he has arrived at this very moment.

URMILA: Let him come.

(*Off-stage the cry 'Jaya Sitaram'*)

I must ask that great being what he saw in the Asoka garden.

BHARATAN: Maharajan! Did you not hear the voice of Hanuman? Will you order ...

RAMAN: Ask him to come.

(*Bharatan exits. Kusan and Lavan now raise their voices and are clearly heard. Enter Hanuman and behind him Bharatan. On seeing Sriraman, Hanuman raises his voice and chants, 'Jaya Sitaram' and prostrates before him. Sriraman gets up from his seat and approaches him. He raises Hanuman and embraces him as if he cannot let him go. In the background the recital of Kusan and Lavan, in a low tone.*)

HANUMAN: Jaya Sitaram!

RAMAN: Aswamedham has given me this good fortune also.

HANUMAN: My Lord! Please bless this servant.... Your slave was performing penance.

RAMAN: May you be blessed ...

HANUMAN: Jaya Sitaram.

URMILA: (*Impatiently*) I have heard that you are a great grammarian. The meanings of sounds are not a mystery to you. And, you use the term 'Sitaram'.

HANUMAN: Oh, jewel among Aryan women! Sita and Rama are not two different beings. Like prakriti and purusha ...

BHARATAN: Where is your 'Sitaram'?

HANUMAN: The very question this devotee has for Ayodhya. I ask the creators of the laws of Aryavamsam, where is my Sitaram?

BHARATAN: Had Ayodhya a tongue, it would have replied.

HANUMAN: I, a south Indian, saw Sita and Raman together.... I saw Raman lamenting, 'Sita! Sita!' wandering in the forest, fainting every now and then. But, even then Sita was there in the heart of Raman.... In Lanka which is like *Kailasam*[5]—in the garden where the koels coo—I saw a sighing and fainting Sita.... Her body emaciated from penance and fasting

reminding me of the crescent shape which appears at the beginning of the bright phase of the moon.... That divine form surrounded by the rakshasis[6] shone like a flame of fire encircled by the smoke.... Even then, Raman was there in Sita's heart. Oh king of kings! Famed for his love for those who serve him, What do I see here ... at your side, Sita as a metal statue.

BHARATAN: On this side we have the granite statue of Raman...

HANUMAN: How did my mistress turn into metal? How did my master grow into granite? Metal and stone...stone and metal.... In this Kosala kingdom aren't there any human beings, oh, King! ... or only metal statues ... or granite ones? Isn't there any place in Ayodhya for Sitaram? (*Taking a step forward*) Where is the Sitaram whom Panchavati's greenery and flowers worshipped with their souls? The Sitaram whom the flock of birds rocked to sleep, singing poems? The Sitaram who were blessed with light from the sky and food from the earth...? They live even now in this slave's heart. Don't you see that, Maharajan?

RAMAN: Dear friend! Even now, can't you see Sita in Raman's heart?

BHARATAN AND URMILA: No, the rock will not bloom.

RAMAN: Look carefully.

HANUMAN: No, King!... Like the tarnished metal there is a pale ugly shape imprinted in your heart. That is not this slave's Sita Devi.

RAMAN: A heart tossed by angry waves can only mirror broken forms.

HANUMAN: My sacred lord's heart is tortured by waves? Even as this Hanuman stands in front of you? Maharajan! I heard about Sita Devi's plight from the soldiers in the waiting room. Please entrust that signet ring to me. Let me once again perform that sacred task. Bearing Sita Devi on my shoulders

I shall reach here before the yagam is completed. Then ... then I must smash that metal statue. My hands itch for action.... Then I can chant 'Jaya Sitaram' to my heart's content. I will not permit that divine name where, the two sounds have the same meaning, to become meaningless. Please order me. (*In a voice throbbing with devotion*) 'Jaya Sitaram, Jaya Sitaram, Jaya Sitaram'.

BHARATAN AND URMILA: (*In voices filled with devotion*) Jaya Sitaram.

(*All the courtiers cry out in voices full of devotion, 'Jaya Sitaram'.*)

HANUMAN: Please permit me.

RAMAN: My friend for life! I am not a free man, but just an axle pin of the chariot wheel that goes round, non-stop. Yet, this axle pin should not break and the wheel smash and shatter. It is made of iron. Solid iron that has the strength to aim and fell, to slash and cut into pieces.... Son of Anjana![7] Tell me, which is greater, Sita or the kingdom.... Say it.... Sita? Or the kingdom?

HANUMAN: (*Astonished*) Blessed one! Are Sita and the kingdom opposing forces? A kingdom without Sita! Like a man without a soul.... I have not practiced that craft.

RAMAN: That is the craft of ruling a kingdom. Let no one practise it...

HANUMAN: Which practitioner of craft decided that there is no place for my mistress, Sita on this earth?

RAMAN: The sun, who is in the grip of *Rahu*[8] is not a kinsman of this world. He is a bad omen for this earth.

HANUMAN: Rahu who strangles the kinsman of this world is the real bad omen. That statecraft which spills the blood of your soul is dangerous for Ayodhya as well as this earth. Throw that ruling craft into the Sarayu river, blessed one.

RAMAN: Raman is a protector, a king ...

HANUMAN: Is he not a human being?

RAMAN: No.

(*Hanuman shudders*)

Just a bridge built by the human race to cross over the great sea of time.... That bridge should not shake ... not move this way and that ...

HANUMAN: Lord! Please forgive me. Now, I understand everything. You are inventing a new interpretation for statecraft, you are putting it to test and making it practically usable.... May you be victorious! But ... I fear that this statecraft which breaks and smashes relationships of the soul is an eternal curse to this earth. Please allow me to depart.... I do not wish to stay here any more.... What value does the friendship begun at *Rishyamookam*[9] have in this process of statecraft? It is just a relationship of the soul.... In a heart which has no place for Sita, will there be a place for Sugrivan...? A place for this servant, Hanuman...? No, no, blessed one.... All his life, Hanuman has learnt and practiced the lessons of friendship. This servant knows to give up anything ... why even sacrifice myself ... for love. You do know that, don't you?

RAMAN: Beloved friend! (*Emotionally*)

HANUMAN: A new experience! A human being turned into a lifeless axle pin of the chariot that rules.... Or into the statecraft's knife ... I have no place among human beings.... I worshipped lonly one person ... that man was not stone.... Now I am convinced that he is stone. So, Hanuman who has a weakness for love, has no place in the midst of human beings. My life ends here. The solitary and peaceful summits of Himalaya will offer a refuge to me. No human beings there ... nor statecraft. The icy covering of eternal peace will console me.

RAMAN: You too.... No, why not ... I wish you well.

HANUMAN: I should see Devi and bid farewell. But, I do not have the strength to do that. If my heart breaks and I die in her presence, it will be her divine hands that take care of me in the end. Please permit me to leave ... this is my last *darshan*[10] of you.... May the Lord who is all powerful bless you!

(*Hanuman respectfully places his palms together and departs. Tears flow intermittently from Raman's eyes. After sometime, he jumps up from his seat and cries in a heartbreaking voice, 'Dear Son'. In the distance, the indistinct chants of 'Jaya Sitaram' from many throats can be heard. The song describing Raman's story resounds.*

Who sees this lotus pond
Where the sun lotus blooms
offering the great eternal fragrance
described by Sage Agasthyan.

The river Godavari flows, the river of Devas,
Surrounded by a cluster of flowering trees,
You can see the elegance of beauty
And the happiness of swans.

The place is full of deer which
Move and jump gracefully
A thousand rainbows opened up
As the peacocks began to dance.

There you can see the towering mountain ranges
Indeed a pleasant and happy sight for the eyes
What can one say about the beauty of
The flowers of champaka, kethaka[11] *or honeyed mango trees.*

Oh, Panchavati glows with the trees
Devatharam[12] *and neerkadambu*[13]
Nature is for her a golden head gear
This fortunate and blessed Panchavati.

The sound of the recital is now low. The scene is silent.)

RAMAN: Panchavati! (*As though in a dream*) There, I can see Panchavati. Bharatan, ask those ascetic boys to come before me and sing!

URMILA: Sita! If only you could see this ...

(Bharatan goes off. The courtiers become anxious. Vasishtan enters from the opposite side.)

VASISHTAN: Maharajan, You are stumbling into danger. This is the beginning. Why should those children come before you and sing?

RAMAN: (*Pleading*) That song gives my heart an unearthly peace. Please allow me to listen to that.

VASISHTAN: You shudder on hearing the voice of the heart. Even I do not have the strength to save you. But one more request from Vasishtan before he admits defeat. Can't you avoid seeing those children?

RAMAN: Oh, Guru! I just want to see them once. I shall be satisfied with that.

VASISHTAN: When the dam breaks, the flow of water will stop only at the ocean.

RAMAN: Can't you too hear it, Guru!

(*Off stage the flow of song begins*)

VASISHTAN: I hear the sound of the downfall of Aryavartham. Ramachandramaharajan ! Your Kulaguru withdraws. May the Almighty give you the strength.

(*Vasishtan exits. When the song reaches its crescendo, Kusan and Lavan enter singing.*)

KUSAN AND LAVAN:

As she went plucking the flowers,
Karnikaram and Asokam
She, with the lotus-shaped eyes,
saw in the forest, a deer.

Its body covered with silvery fur,
She watched with wide open eyes
With a spring of love in her heart
It moved joyfully for some time
Seen as the golden deer at first
It gave rise to feelings of wonder.

RAMAN: Oh, beloved boys! Who are you?

KUSAN AND LAVAN: Disciples of Valmiki; Kusan and Lavan.

URMILA: (*Impatiently*) Who is your mother?

KUSAN: We are permitted only to say 'Disciples of Valmiki'.

URMILA: Beloved children! Come closer.

(*Urmila and the children move nearer to each other. Urmila embraces and kisses the children and weeps.*)

Sons, do you know this mother?...

KUSAN: Lavan, she looks very much like mother ...

(*Urmila embraces the children once again with tears in her eyes. The courtiers too weep.*)

RAMAN: Who wrote this poem?

KUSAN: Sage Valmiki. He wrote the story of Raman in five hundred chapters and taught us.

LAVAN: Our Guru is now composing the second half of Raman's story.

BHARATAN: Pay respects to the hero of Raman's story.

KUSAN AND LAVAN: Ramachandramaharajan! May you who established the Aryavamsam be blessed! (*Bows respectfully*)

RAMAN: Haven't you sent the invitation to Sage Valmiki?

BHARATAN: The Sage has come.

RAMAN: I am blessed.

(*Meanwhile Kusan and Lavan whisper something to each other*)

LAVAN: (*To Kusan*) No, I shall ask. (*To Raman*) Maharajan! In the description of the coronation, Our Guru has described that Vaidehi (Sita) sat adorning your left side. Rajan! Where is Vaidehi?

(*Raman is startled.*)

KUSAN: We are anxious to see Sita Devi. Rajan! Where is Devi?

(*Courtiers look at one another.*)

URMILA: Children, haven't you seen her? Sita stands there in the yagasala, a metal statue.

KUSAN: Who cursed that generous soul? King, how did that jewel among chaste women turn into metal?

RAMAN: (*Desolate*) When you study the latter part of Raman's story you will understand that too. Let Valmiki himself tell this world that story also. Please present eighteen thousand gold coins to these beloved boys.

KUSAN: Oh, King! Why do we need gold coins?

LAVAN: We will not accept your gold coins.

KUSAN: We who live in the hermitage and sustain ourselves on fruits and roots, what use do we have for this gold?

RAMAN: In that case please tell me, what you want.

KUSAN: Permit us to sing before all the inhabitants of Ayodhya, the history of your bravery so that they can hear it.

LAVAN: Maharajan! In your kingdom, do not permit faithful wives to be turned into metal statues.

RAMAN: Oh Great Lord Vishnu! (*Begins to meditate in an attempt to gain mental strength. The sound of wooden sandals. The guard enters and announces, 'Sage Valmiki' and exits.*)

LAVAN: Kusan, our Gurunathan!

RAMAN: Bharatan, welcome and receive the Sage.

BHARATAN: Maharajan! Please forgive me. I request you to take some rest. You do not have the mental peace to receive any one. I

shall receive the Sage, take care of him and make him happy. You can meet him by and by.

RAMAN: Kumaran! (*Tenderly*) You are aiming at and smashing this head with love. But, the King of Ayodhya is not a coward. Nor a weak man who deserves compassion. Please remember that any kind of victory is impossible in this world, if Raman is defeated. Go and bring the Sage. I do not have anything to hide from the poet who sang Raman's story.

(*Bharatan exits. Sage Valmiki enters with a disciple. When that divine form with long white hair and beard appears, Sriraman and the courtiers rise and pay their respects to him. Behind him, Bharatan also enters.*)

THE COURTIERS IN ONE VOICE: Welcome to the poet Valmiki!

VALMIKI: (*Raising his right palm and blessing everyone*) Ramachandramaharajan! (*Watches him seriously*)

RAMAN: Oh Sage, foremost among ascetics! Please forgive this sinner.

VALMIKI: The king can be relieved that Valmiki is not Durvasav[14]. May you have a long life!. The poet who composed Ramayanam rejoices in the good fortune to see you. But the poet's heart is unable to find fullness in anything.... Even in the shining moon he sees a flaw.... Beloved children, come closer.

(*Kusan and Lavan stand on either side of Valmiki, raise their faces and look at him.*)

Haven't you sung Ramayanam and made the king happy?

KUSAN: Yes, with the blessings of our great Guru.

VALMIKI: Have you children met the characters of the story of Raman and paid your respects to them?

LAVAN: Only Sita Devi is not here.

VALMIKI: Maharajan! Please show Sita to these children who love the story of Ramayanam.

KUSAN AND LAVAN: Where is Devi?

VALMIKI: The great King Janaka did not present you that golden statue. It is not that golden statue that trudged along with you through all the forests of this country, Bhaarata...not that lifeless statue which jumped into the fire at Lanka.... Show these children, devotees of Sita your wife, the one who shared your dharmam. Let them feast their eyes on her.

RAMAN: Oh, Sage!

VALMIKI: Didn't the ruler of Saketam, an auspicious soul, fulfil countless subjects' desires and earn fame? Look, why don't you now fulfil the wishes of these children, who are personifications of innocence.

RAMAN: (*Getting up from his seat and bowing*) Oh, Blessed One! You, who are the greatest of ascetics, must forgive me.

VALMIKI: What, the sovereign of Saketam does not know who his better half is? Amazing! Ramachandramaharajan! Do you know who these children are? (*Holding both of them close on either side*) Know you these children?

RAMAN: Oh, Sage! Raman who is a mere human being is powerless.

VALMIKI: These boys are your children.

(*Sound of bells ringing*)

Kusan and Lavan—Sita's children.... Here is the brave Lavan who attemped to seize and tie your sacrificial horse. Here, this is Kusan who has mastered knowledge even at such a young age.... Look carefully at their faces.... Oh courtiers of Raja Ramachandran! Can't you see this shining glow of bravery! Don't you see the halo of warriorhood acquired by Ikshwaku and Dileepan shining radiantly.... The children of that chaste woman whom you threw to the wild animals.... Children.... prostrate before your father.

(*Kusan and Lavan prostrate at their father's feet*)

RAMAN: Oh, Sage! Please give this sinner permission to embrace these children.

VALMIKI: If your inner conscience allows you, please do it.... But these bodies, tender and beautiful as floral petals, will scorch you. Show them their mother ... thus get a release from the curse and then you may kiss them.

RAMAN: Sita ... Sita ...

VALMIKI: Your tongue does not have the courage to say that to me, does it? Know that Valmiki's hermitage became blessed by that chaste woman's presence. The most famous among kings! If you do not accept your abandoned wife...Saketam will burn to ashes, destroyed by a woman's curses. Immerse yourself in that Ganga of purity and rid yourself of sin.

RAMAN: Saketam ordained that Sita is not pure.

VALMIKI: This Valmiki ordains that Sita is pure. He also ordains that Saketam without Sita is accursed.... If Sita is not pure, let the fire turn into water ... let the sky shatter and fall ... let this Valmiki's strength of penance be dissolved in half a minute.

(*Sound of bells ringing and conch blowing*)

Rajan!

(*Enter Vasishtan*)

VASISHTAN: Oh Sage! You should not undermine the strength of Aryavamsam.

VALMIKI: (*Furious*) Is that lifeless statue to uphold the strength of Aryavamsam? You may insult me saying that Valmiki is not an Aryan, dismiss him as a hunter.... For Valmiki, Aryan and dasyu, monkey and demon are not different from one another. The tiny grass and the full moon are also not different. For Valmiki the whole signifies changes in creation that glows at the root of everything. Great Sage! For Valmiki the human being is important ... and humanity worth coveting. That is why Valmiki sang the story of the human being.

VASISHTAN: Valmiki forgets that the forest and the habitation of human beings are different. The forest reveals manifold beauties such as blooming flowers and singing birds to inspire the composition of poetry. But, this is a country, a city, a place where people live.... In order to awaken a group of people and elevate them, the imagination of a poet is not enough. Our duty is not to sing lullabies and put them to sleep. The Sage should not forget that. Do not create a meaningless deluge of emotions and drown a clan's growth.

VALMIKI: Great Sage! Emotion is the greatest wealth of a human being. We consider those living things that do not have emotions as insects or animals.

VASISHTAN: You are a poet. You are very skilled in talking to the heart. Vasishtan admits defeat. But, Maharajan! Please remember that Vasishtan's defeat is the defeat of Aryavamsam.

RAMAN: (*Pleading*) Kulaguru! If you would permit!

VASISHTAN: Maharajan! I do not have any further advice for you.

RAMAN: I have one request.... If Sita Devi would take an oath before this court ...

VALMIKI: Stop! What a sin! Does the fire need a witness to proclaim its ability to burn? Didn't Sita take an oath once?... Sugrivan was there. Vibhishanan too. Even the great Hanuman witnessed it.

RAMAN: But, the inhabitants of Ayodhya did not witness it.

VALMIKI: King! Did *you* see it?

(*Raman is silent*)

All right, (*To the disciple who came with him*) Mudgalan! Go and bring Sita Devi.

(*Disciple goes off. The court is silent ... immobile.... Ringing of bells...gradually the sounds of the bells resound and reach a crescendo. Once again, everything becomes*

silent. Sita enters in the garb of an ascetic and prostrates. Kusan and Lavan run to their mother and stand next to her. Urmila weeps.)

KUSAN AND LAVAN: Mother, are you Sita Devi? Is our mother the Queen of Ayodhya?

SITA: Beloved children! Your mother ... (*Tries in vain to control her emotions ... finally succeeds*) Yes, Maharajan! May you be blessed! (*Kissing the children and caressing their foreheads*) Children ... prostrate before your father!

(*When Kusan and Lavan approach Raman, he embraces them imprisoning them in his tight embrace.*)

VALMIKI: (*Brusquely*) Maharajan! What do you have to tell Sita?

RAMAN: Oh Sage! Must I, myself say that?

VALMIKI: No other tongue has the strength to say it.

RAMAN: Sita!

SITA: (*Lifting her head*) My Lord!

RAMAN: For the well being of Saketam, please take an oath, that you are chaste.

URMILA: You are insulting the whole of womanhood.

BHARATAN: (*Angrily*) Maharajan! This Bharatan is ashamed to have been born in Ayodhya.

(*Kausalya enters*)

KAUSALYA: Son, can you repeat what you said, once again, before your mother.... My blessed Raman has insulted a mother. Haven't you? On hearing that I must die ...

(*Sriraman is completely helpless. Sita prostrates before Kausalya. Holding Sita and helping her to get up.*) My blessings for the Queen of Ayodhya.... (*Embracing Sita and weeping*) Dasarathan's wife is filled with sorrow.

RAMAN: (*Moving to kneel in front of Kausalya*) Mother! Forgive this son.... Mother's son is squirming like a worm ... Doesn't mother see

that? (*Bursts out weeping…looks intently at mother. Kausalya caresses his head affectionately; rises after sometime.*)

Oh, Guru!

VASISHTAN: Vasishtan shall not ignore the king's orders. Daughter! Nothing else can be done.... Take an oath ... at least to console your husband.

RAMAN: (*With determination*) Mother, honouring Ayodhya you should forgive me. Raman is capable of forgiving those who love him.... Sita! forgive me.... For the sake of Saketam.... Take an oath. (*Closing his eyes, gnashing his teeth*) In mind, word, and deed, except the husband ...

SITA: (*Weeping profusely*) This, in front of my children? Let this earth crack open and protect this woman's pride.... Mother!

(*Falls on the earth. Sounds of terrible thunder from the clouds. A whirlwind blows. The earth is covered in darkness. There is smoke everywhere. When the sound reaches its crescendo and extinguishes itself, for some time there is only the sound of intermittent ringing of bells. When the scene clears again, the courtiers stand immobile as though sculpted in stone. Kusan and Lavan stand sorrowfully, clinging to the hands of Valmiki who has turned his face upwards. Raja Ramachandran is kneeling, begging his mother to forgive him, lamenting, calling the name of Sita. Kausalya stands like a sculpture, immobile, prepared to bear all sorrows.*)

VALMIKI: (*In a resonant voice*) Sita ... Sita does not perish.... Sita is nature itself ...

(*Curtain*)

Ramayana Stories

by

Sarah Joseph

Black Holes

Avoiding the light and the guardian spirits of light, the old woman walked, stooping, keeping close to the stables. At the slightest movement, the wounds on her body opened their mouths. The swift and cutting wind rubbed chilli powder into them. The heat creeping down from her forehead to her eyes was the warmth of blood. The old woman spat blood-salt contemptuously. Manthara had not chosen to be a spy to back off every time she saw blood.

On seeing her, the horses neighed a warning. Manthara felt that the clatter of hooves on the granite-paved stables could be heard all over Ayodhya. She uttered a curse, mouth sealed.

'Who is it?'

From the stables sprang both the question and the light. A lit torch flared and stretched. The old woman stood pressed against the wall, still as a painting. They could not find her. The torch was pulled back into the shed.

The old woman crossed the stables, escaping the horses' eyes, kneeling, crawling, and creeping. The wound on her knee was angered as it scraped the granite. She had to crawl another twenty yards on sharp gravel to reach the spot between the big and small stone lamps where Valakan would be waiting for her.

Tonight it was Valakan's woman's turn to light the stone lamps. She had not lit them. Nor would she. Expecting gratitude from those who eat is sheer greed on the part of those who offer it. After all, Kosalam was not that land somewhere in the south, known as Maveli's land[1] where there were no thefts, betrayals, and lies. The old woman was amused. Amusement turned to contempt and spread on her face.

On the other side of the lamps begins the forest. Where the forest ended, stood the fort. Valakan would have hung a ladder fashioned out of twisted wild creepers to assist her to get out of the fort. A ladder marked by an *attuvanchi*[2] flower placed on top as an adornment. A ladder suitable for an old hunchbacked woman to both hold on to as she climbed up and hang on to as she climbed down. Outside the fortress, Valakan's single-ox cart would also be ready. He would have untied the big bells around the ox's neck. One hundred gold coins for Valakan to drive her beyond the borders of the country. A gold bangle for his woman for not lighting the stone lamps. Ten yards of silk for his daughter.

Straightening, she looked around the place she had crawled up to and crouching, Manthara hid herself between two mountainous haystacks. She could not see Valakan behind the stone lamps. She sat waiting, watching intently, and wondering when his dark lean form would emerge from the darkness. Not a leaf moved.

There was the smell of danger. Would it be a betrayal? Would Valakan inform against her? Was there any honest smile in Kosalam? This was not the first time her calculations had failed. It was not for nothing that she had chosen to wait in a place other than the one Valakan had chosen or gone around the stables, crouching behind the haystacks instead of taking the path suggested by him.

Suddenly, a torch leapt out from the stable. The haystacks shone like golden mountains. Another torch followed. Then without a break, ten to sixty of them emerged, as though in preparation for an attack. Manthara was sure that she would be caught. Blanketed

by darkness she stretched, face down, on the ground. In the valley between the golden haystack mountains, Manthara's hump became a black rock.

Valakan's betrayal smouldered in her. The wounds wailed aloud. Manthara's hand went to the handle of the knife tucked into her waist. It was no divine weapon...for that one should have secret assignations with the *devas*. Also, the devas preferred very beautiful women. And then, there was penance! But could starving people find time for all that? Even so, she knew well how to wield the knife.

The torches roamed around the stone lamps four or five times. They looked north and south, up and down, all around. For some time they stopped the search and cracked jokes. Then they went back the way they had come.

'There is not even a fly around,' someone said, astonished. Manthara wanted to laugh aloud. Such sincerity! In the soldiers wandering around to catch the woman-spy for the king! How clever! Brains that couldn't even think of touching their flaming torches to the wicks in the stone lamps!

She must leave this place as fast as possible and step into the forest. Manthara scolded and subdued her wounds. She tied her bundle close to her chest. Then she unsheathed the knife and readied it. The moonless night hid her. In the darkness her eyes shone like those of a wild cat and saw things more clearly.

At dawn tomorrow, there would be no Manthara in Ayodhya. The secrets that she had guarded without the slightest leak would soon become the street gossip of Ayodhya. Dasarathan's lust and betrayal, Aswapathi's greed, ambition, and anger—would all fall like a flaming comet on Ayodhya's head. She, the hunchback would be the one to set fire to its tail. She would tear down the hypocritical veils of Ayodhya in the presence of the people. Then and only then would the people understand what kings do when seized by lust and anger.

With a blazing need to take revenge, she remembered the attack against her in the morning. The gnashing of her teeth sounded like twigs breaking in the forest.

She had stepped into the palace courtyard in search of Valakan after her morning bath, her body smeared with red sandalwood paste and her silvery white hair loosened. It was easy to find Valakan even in a crowd as he walked with a slight limp. And by his charcoal dark complexion. It was at that moment that a man had rushed out and jumped at her, roaring like a bull. It was an unexpected attack and she had lost her balance. Before she could escape, tricking him, he began to drag her. She tried in vain to free herself by beating the ground with her hands and legs. Contact with the granite-paved courtyard bruised and broke her. Dragging her along, he pushed her down at Satrughnan's feet.

'She is the cause of all our misfortunes. The hunchback who has come here to spy on us!'

The captor bellowed. She wanted to see who he was. But, he stood pressing his foot on her hump, crushing her. Finally, when she looked up she saw before her Satrughnan's face blazing like a furnace. It was about to explode with rage. When their eyes met, he fell on her and tore her body savagely like a wild elephant would a withering banana stem. When he grasped her by the arm, twirled and threw her on the ground she thought she would die. Her last conscious memory was the snapping of her sandalwood chain, the beads scattering along with drops of her blood.

Something moved in the dark. With the ease of a wild cat, Manthara slid behind a rock. The flicker of white clothes. Could it be Valakan? Manthara's catlike eyes sharpened and glittered.

When she recognized that the person walking through the trees was none other than Bharatan, Manthara's forehead creased with a frown. Bharatan in this forest, alone in the dark! Why? Especially today; why was he in this forest, far away from the palace, where

even after the ritual of immersion of bones from the pyre, the paid mourners wailed aloud to signify that the great sorrows had not diminished, the musical instruments wailed long in mourning and the messengers sang as though their throats would break. But, he had left all that behind and come away to be alone in this forest? Bharatan's head bowed with the pressure of his thoughts as he continued to walk. The only thing that he did not have was a nose that could scent Manthara. A foolish boy who did not know the real essence of the drama enacted so well by everyone on stage! When he walked past she got the smell of breast milk. Didn't anyone teach him the saying, 'Mother is equal to God?' The sword that he raised against his mother must be piercing his own throat now. A world of fathers ordering their sons to raise their axes and swords[3] against their mothers' necks to preserve power! Ho!

What a first-class stage Ayodhya is! An unusual play was being performed where everyone takes on the role of the *sutradharan* (narrator). Naivete was written on the faces of all actors and actresses. The white clothes that spoke of extreme *satwa*[4]. The canine and tusk alone kept hidden and invisible from the spectator.

I am the sutradharan, the character Dasarathan says, dancing and holding on to the curtain. A face overflowing with compassion. Gentle, sweet words. The great tradition of *Raghuvamsam*[5] should be preserved. For that, the eldest son Raman alone should be crowned king...

The Kekaya king, Aswapathi, bursting with anger, waiting to rush from the green room to the stage. I am the sutradharan. The one who struts on stage is an old, lustful cheat. Only after he promised the kingdom as bride price did I give my young daughter in marriage to him. Ayodhya is Bharatan's. If he does not keep his word there will be a war.

Between the stage and the green room stands another character holding a different curtain. It is Vasishtan, taking the role

of sutradharan ostensibly to uphold the honour of Ayodhya! Aswapathyi should never reach the stage. So he dances blocking the door of entry.

On such a stage dominated by these false characters and their dances, Bharatan leaps, twirling his sword and declaiming the dialogue given to him, not knowing that his own generosity of heart would be exploited.

'I don't want the righteous Sriraman to accuse me of killing my own mother. Otherwise a cruel and sinful woman like you would be ... Ha! Ha! Ha!'

Aswapathi's tricks and efforts were all wasted in a snap! Ayodhya wriggled out of his hands like a slippery fish! How short a while ago had Ayodhya wanted to teach a new kind of devotion to one's mother—that of killing her and presenting the kingdom to the brother.

This is the fortnight of the new moon. Now she walked through the path of glow worms. She still had to cover a great distance to reach the fort walls. She had to cross the forest and reach the field. By circling the pond of red lotuses she would reach the secret path which ended at the foot of the banyan tree that defied being encircled by the outstretched arms of a hundred people. The fort stood beyond that tree. If Valakan had not betrayed her, he would be standing there, near the fortress walls.

Has the secret been leaked? There were spies all around. 'From the moment I set foot in Ayodhya I have been surrounded by spies', thought Manthara. Even when she ate or prayed, she could see in the air the eyes of spies bare of eyelashes. She spent every second looking death in the face. Instead of this game with her heart swinging at the tip of a sword, would she ever bathe in comfort, sleep serenely, wake without fear, look at her children, and laugh without anxiety.... Imagine such a life?

Manthara's lips twisted. Kings!

All figures of clay made in the same mould. The moment they sense power slipping from their hands, they grow furious. When they meet each other, face to face, they embrace and kiss. But, when their backs are turned they do not hesitate to stab one another. Even the great God of Death is frustrated with these men who are unwilling to die without ensuring that the throne goes to their offspring. They roar, shake their swords, and enact tragedies. Finally, before their bottoms touched the thrones they have snatched violently, they fall.... Manthara wanted to hoot and scream: 'I know everything! I know the move of the enemy pawn enacted here. Were I to shout aloud all that's been concealed by each one, my friends, many sun-images will fall and perish, powdered and charred. A great many sun-images who wallow at present in acts of compassion.

'Who is that?'

Manthara stopped in her tracks hearing this startled question emerging from the darkness. Immediately she shrank back into the thickets. Slowly she stretched and pressed herself to the ground. Her hump rose from the clothes as dark as night and stood like a rock.

'Who is there?' This time the voice sounded more anxious. It came closer. Satrughnan. In the forest, in the dark, alone, coming along another path.... Satrughnan? Walking with his sword unsheathed. His footsteps faltered. Stepping on Manthara's hump, he slipped and was about to fall.

'Accursed rock!' He cursed. After that he went around 'the rock' and disappeared with his glistening sword. Manthara got to her feet slowly. Satrughnan, who would never be considered a candidate for the throne. Was he also hatching a secret conspiracy? Will the seat of power be upset once again?

Before moving four steps forward, Manthara discovered that there were people sitting on the steps leading to the lotus pond. By their profiles, she could tell that the man seated in the centre of

the circle was Vasishtan. Wasn't anyone going to sleep tonight in Ayodhya? Which strings of conspiracy were being tightened?

In any case what would she gain by new information on the internal dramas of Ayodhya? She had satisfactorily completed the job that Aswapathi had entrusted to her. By using her intelligence she even managed to do things that Aswapathi had not mentioned to her. Even though the coronation was a secret, well guarded by tens of thousands of spies, she managed to leak it on time. She even sent a coded message to Aswapathi through a group of traders leaving for Kekayam[6]. The coronation of Raman was imminent. Aswapathi would not be invited. Janakan, renowned for his search and fulfilment of the true dharma and justice in any action, would also not be invited. The promise of fulfiling the bride price will be thrown to the winds by Dasarathan. Aswapathi should come to Ayodhya in disguise. Let the people of Ayodhya know that the coronation which was about to take place was an act of betrayal. The coronation must be stopped. Call Janakan also. His unflinching sense of justice can be used by Aswapathi as a good supporting tactic. If Ayodhya slipped from their hands now, they would never be able to retrieve it.

Manathara had planned everything shrewdly. But the traders were sent back at the borders of the kingdom. Not even a fly was allowed to leave Ayodhya. The doors were closed and bolted. So, it was very clear to Manthara that she had to directly intervene and break Dasarathan's secret conspiracy. A one-woman army. The army of the hunchback. Smiling, Manthara stepped into the combat zone.

When Dasarathan and Vasishtan emerged from the chambers of discussion, their faces bright, having made the right moves, they saw Manthara with her twisted smile and grew pale. She was singing the heroic tales of Raghu to young children. Her voice was clear, words distinct, and narration mind-deluding.

Later, when the preparations for the coronation were in full swing, she ran around, singing stories of the sacrifices made by

Dileepan and Sudakshina[7] to the tired workers. But, only when her eyes locked with those of Vasisthan, did she have a scornful smile on her lips that later spread to her hump. From her hump it went to Dasarathan's heart.

When the news came that Kaikeyi was unwell and had entered the anger room, untying her hair, tearing her clothes, and rolling on the bare floor, Manthara could read the shock of the inevitable reflected on Dasarathan's face. Manthara had to suppress her laughter when she heard the court jester mockingly state that the king's love for the daughter of Kaikeyi had weakened him.

But, when Raman came down with a smile, as cool as moonlight she felt great contempt and disgust for all of them—Kaikeyi, Dasarathan, Aswapathi, and all other symbols of ruling power. When that child gently caressed her hump, as he did always, and walked away, she felt a contempt even for the worm's life that she was forced to lead! In order to eat three meals a day, what sort of roles did the lowly and oppressed like her have to play! The red-eyed blisters of power that erupted on Kaikeyi's face as Manthara advised her on many things, the sickly pallor that spread on Dasarathan's aged face when he began to fear that the lie would be exposed, the vulgar greed in Aswapathi's eyes as he salivated over extending the boundaries of Kekaya kingdom when Bharatan gained power—she was disgusted with all of them. Feelings of revenge unsatisfied.

She must escape. Before the day dawned she must cross the boundary. She walked carefully with measured steps, ensuring that no sound emerged when her feet pressed on dry leaves. On no account should she be caught. She should not pay attention to anything other than thoughts of escape. She tightened her hold on the knife, hid herself behind the leaves, and moved forward.

Manthara reached the secret path faster than she had expected and stood at the foot of the great tree which was so huge that it could not be encircled by the outstretched arms of a hundred men. Salutations! On the other side of the tree stood the fort

with its ramparts piercing the sky. Manthara mentally marked and calculated by sight the place where Valakan was supposed to be waiting for her if he had not betrayed her, and took a step forward.

In the darkness she could hear someone weeping!... Manthara's ears grew sharp like those of a hunter dog. Someone was sobbing with abandon. Manthara had never been scared of mad or evil spirits. But, she had to be careful of human beings. Holding the knife aloft, Manthara looked around. She was astounded to see Kaikeyi, holding on to the roots of the banyan tree and weeping her heart out.

Kaikeyi said, 'I am coming with you to Kekayam.' Manthara was very angry. Was the last escape route being shut? How did this princess emerge escaping the eyes of the spies and guards who guarded her bedroom and the palace compound?

'Why are you silent? I too am coming with you.'

'Where to? To Aswapathi, your 'loving father'? Do you think he will accept you with a hundred outstretched arms if you go to him after losing Ayodhya? Who would want you?'

Kaikeyi burst into a fresh bout of weeping, pleading, 'Please take me to my mother.'

Manthara's face hardened. Her words burnt red-hot. Like an evil prophetess, she raised both her arms and said:

'Saketam[8] was always your prison. Now it has turned into your grave. Never, you will never be able to escape from there.'

Kaikeyi shuddered. She wept heart-rendingly. Pain, frustration, and the thought that she would not be able to escape, loosened the bonds that tied Manthara's tongue.

'I will go. I will get out of this place. Your father has promised to give a job to my hunchback son and a measure of land that I choose, to me. I will get hold of it. Then ...'

Manthara had lost her balance. She became mad. She gnashed her teeth and said, 'Then for at least four days we will live like human beings, not like worms, but like human beings.'

Kaikeyi was afraid. She saw in the eyes of her old servant woman,

who stood before her holding the knife high, a she-devil who could decide her fate, and took a step back. Manthara did not stop.

'I feel no gratitude towards you, Aswapathi, Raman, or Dasarathan. I am grateful only to the rewards that I can get.'

'You, she-devil!', Kaikeyi raised her hands to hit her servant woman. Manthara stepped aside craftily.

'A she-devil now, a while ago a divine spirit! Daughter of Kekaya! Thrones have been installed in the blood of innocent persons. Only the cries for murder will emerge from them. Who knows it better than me? On this frightening night, in this dangerous forest, in the shadows where predators lurk, let the ghost of Dasarathan save you.'

Without waiting another minute, Manthara disappeared into the darkness. She escaped like a *vethala*[9] swinging on a wild creeper.

'Take me too!' Kaikeyi's lament was crushed under the wheels of the single-ox cart.

Asoka

Having spent a year in pain and suffering, Sita lowered her eyes and examined her body. The Body! Clay, battered and destroyed by continuous onslaughts of snow, rain, sunlight, lustful gazes, destructive stares, falling one upon the other on her face, neck, hands, breasts, navel, waist, legs, and feet. Scars of severe brutalization, scabs of drying tears, wounds of humiliation. Trailing in mud and dust, hair so matted that the strands could not be separated. Nails grown long, distinct from fingers. Skin drying and peeling off.

Which dirt had she been ordered to cleanse by bathing, immersed?

Palms held open on her lap, legs crossed, Sita sat upright.

Vibhishanan's women stood by reverently having informed her of the order.

Let Sita come ceremoniously, after a dip under water, a bath of complete immersion!

From beyond the leafy bushes came the sound of Vibhishanan shuffling his feet. The odour of the sin of fratricidal betrayal in his breath disturbed Sita. The new master of Lanka was struggling to hold his neck erect, crushed by the crown grown lusterless with the smeared blood of his brothers. Sorrow and surprise hung on the

broad, dark faces of his women. Sita sat for a long time just watching their faces. Afterwards, she said to them in a voice that sounded like a peaceful, reverberating bell:

'I wish to see my husband now—before taking a bath.'

Behind the bushes Vibhishanan's head sank as low as the ground. His plea was like a hushed cry.

It is his order. Have the heart to fulfil it.

A frightening silence lay over the sea surrounding Lanka at that time. Above the sea, like a frozen clot of blood, stood the sun. The shadow of dark, poisonous clouds engulfed the sky and cast a black shroud over Lanka. Huge vultures sat unmoving, row upon row, staring intently at the still sea. The broken chariot of the Vanquished dragged across the seashore. He lay face down on the steps of the chariot, blood from his wounds flowing like a river. Crawling over the damp sand, hands and legs ploughed ridges, filling them with his own foaming blood. Sita's matted hair and tattered clothes were tied to the broken chariot rungs. She was hauled along the seashore of Lanka, dragged in the mud, hair tugged back, her clothes undone. Occasionally when the sound of a conch rose like a sword plunged deep into the sorrow of silence, the vultures thrashed and spread their wings, later folding them to sit still. At intervals, the sea and the silence belched like the weary and exhausted sounds of weeping from a house of death.

'Come ... water flowing after your immersion! Without wringing your clothes! Without drying your hair, water streaming off you!'

From Lanka's women's quarters, widows stepped out, their faces unveiled. Suppressing in their hearts the curses that might destroy their clan, they stepped into the sea and immersed themselves. Water flowing from them, they went round the sacrificial rice offered to the dead, and stood with their palms pressed together. From their long, loosened hair, drops of water fell soundlessly. The bushes stirred!

Once again, parting words, loaded with the sin of fratricidal

betrayal. Sita raised her eyes to the skies of Lanka stained with poison. Then she lowered her head to the soil soaked in the blackened blood of Lankans. Clutching a handful of soil in her palms and holding them close to her chest, she said to the new ruler of Lanka in a voice that echoed like a peaceful, resounding bell:

'I wish to see my husband now—before taking a bath.'

Leaning, Sita rested her head on the bosom of the *Simsapa*[1] tree. That immoveable creation which had stood as both support and witness, understood that there was something impure in the essence of the Victor's order. The tree extended a solitary hand, a branch from a world beyond spoken words and consoled the soil. When the tender green leaves caressed her head, Sita felt helpless and weary. Embracing the mother trunk, slowly turning into ashes from the fiery arrow embedded inextricably in its chest, she fell into its lap of roots, dazed.

Vibhishanan's women held her in their arms. This is not our justice, we, a subjugated people. This is the order of the Victor. Thus they consoled her and put drops of breast milk in her burning eyes that had no tears left to shed. Her throbbing breast filled with suppressed sobs was caressed by their touch as soft as a lullaby. She was embraced and held on laps wide enough to hold a whole universe.

'An order is an order and has to be carried out like one.' Vibhishanan muttered. He walked away, on his huge feet, struggling to hold his head straight, crushed inside the crown that did not fit him.

Sita sat up. She bowed low and paid her respects to the lone, tired Asoka tree that stood amidst other trees uprooted and thrown down, the flowers smashed, the arbours still burning and the waters of the lake baked dry. After that, head bent, she followed Vibhishanan's women to the seashore of Lanka.

All around there were only ashes, burning embers, chunks of flesh, the crows of sacrifice, and the monstrous shadows of vultures

swooping down on Lanka. The wind that blew from the sea carried the odour of burning and putrefying flesh of human beings, monkeys, and *asuras*. Whenever the fingers of dead asuras or branches of trees were pointed at her, Sita trembled and stumbled in her path. The frightening silence rose every now and then, the cries of victory followed by a child's continuous cry or a mother's ceaseless wail. She stood there exhausted, pressing her hands to her chest. Whose was the sin? Was it that of Aryan virility that had slashed the nose and ears of a lower caste woman who dared to make the mistake of begging for love? Or was it that of the justice of the subjugated, which seeking revenge, laid hands on the woman and the land of the dominant? Finally, who suffered the result of the sin?

To Sita, the distance to the seashore of Lanka seemed to be more than a thousand miles. The sea lay quiet, with an aching, dark calmness. The sun, like a moving, melting block of blood, fell drop by drop and sank into the ocean. Sita covered her face and walked through the row of vultures waiting eagerly to tear apart the flesh of the Vanquished. The crows that came specially to eat the sacrificial offerings slanted their grey necks and looked secretly at Sita. She stood, her head bent amidst the women of the Vanquished. They too immersed themselves in the sea and came out without drying themselves and stood with folded hands. Before Sita's feet lay scattered the *karuka*[2] grass, flowers and grains of cooked rice.

What did the order mean? Unaware of the real meaning, Sita collapsed. An impenetrable silence assailed her.

Sita stood next to Mandodari, who stared at the sea, her face ash-pale, her eyes dry and tearless, her hair thick like a dense forest sweeping the seashore. In her heart was the sound of someone clapping and beckoning. The same crows hurried forward, flapping their wings. Sita, along with Mandodari, dipped herself in the sea of Lanka. For a moment, Lanka observed complete silence. There was a break in the sounds of victory that rose. Suddenly the vultures shrieked, their voices sounding like a heartbreaking lament.

Come after a bath, dripping wet!
Without wringing out wet clothes!
Without wiping your hair ...

After the immersion Mandodari and Sita got out, one behind the other. With her wet clothes on, Sita circled the sacrificial rice. The tip of the grass, plucked and thrown between her and the Vanquished lay on the ground, unwithered.

Sita stood with her eyes closed, her hands pressed together.

Vibhishanan's women took her hands and led her. They dried her hair and applied sandalwood paste all over her body. They rubbed fragrant cosmetics and dressed her up in fine clothes and jewellery. In her heart a fire burned. The heat and light of that fire glowed in Sita's eyes. Vibhishanan's women who attempted to put eye makeup withdrew their hands hastily, unable to bear the heat from her eyes. They stood and watched Sita with unblinking eyes. Whose the sin? Who the sufferer of its results? Was nature who filled the animal's heart with lust, the sinner? Or was it the persuasions of justice which mutilated the woman and the soil for not containing their passion? If it was Lanka that hurt Sita, the women of Lanka sat before Sita with bowed heads and seemed to be begging for forgiveness. The conventions of war had loosened their coarse hair, fragmented their dark and sturdy bodies. Sita shuddered thinking of their physical wounds and the great losses they had borne. She clutched their calloused hands with her slender, feeble fingers and held them fast. Then with a sob that rose from her vitals she leaned on their strong shoulders. They escorted her with the compassion they would feel for a sacrificial animal being led to the *yagasala*.

His legs firmly planted on the soil that he had conquered, The Victor stood, one eye blazing with anger and the other with disgust. Squeezing and pressing her way through the crowd of bears, monkeys, and demons who pushed and pulled to move forward, Sita walked behind Vibhishanan. She shrank into herself at the humiliation of being led as a culprit into the presence of the Victor,

instead of the dream she had nursed about a separated lover who on winning the war fought over her, would throw down his bow and arrow and run to her like water flowing from a burst dam. Even now her heartbeat quickened, anticipating a glimpse of a face rising like the sun from the cover of black clouds. But, it was difficult for her to distinguish that face, black as poison, filled with suppressed anger and dark with suspicion, from those of monkeys and demons. When she did recognize him, Sita stood stunned amidst the crowds!

The Victor's anger blazed like a fire flaring, overfed with ghee! The despoiled one. The object of a depraved gaze. One who had sat on the lap of the Vanquished. One who had spent the night in his house. Before that face, suffused with the darkness that smothers the sun in an eclipse, Sita stood, tired, withered by the nearness of a scorching fire.

'Vaidehi!'

Sita shuddered like the earth at the declaration of a war. Like the sounds of victory disturbing the womens' quarters of the vanquished, her heart grew uneasy.

'I did not win this war to reclaim you. The insult inflicted on me and my clan…'

Suddenly, Sita slipped and fell from a steep, overhanging cliff. Before she hit massed rocks that lay spread in the deeper regions, a pair of strong, dark, hairy arms gathered her up and held her. A voice tinged with the salt and wetness of the sea breeze whispered.

'All the glories are rightfully Lanka's. The soil flung aside contemptuously by the victor is Lanka. Sita and Lanka are one and the same.

Once again the rain will fall on Lanka. Once again, the Asoka grove will bloom. The sourness of blood soaked by farmlands will evaporate. Once again life will wake up, quivering like green shoots sprouting.

So, joyously kick the chest of Lanka with your dainty feet!'

The Vanquished knelt, his broken body like a mountain covered

in blood. His hands cupped and extended. Somewhere inside her the spring of compassion burst. Tenderly, Sita stroked the forehead of the Vanquished. By her grace, he turned to stone sliding into a blissful slumber of millions of aeons.

'Maithili!' The crowd waited, their ears alert, to soak in the words of the Victor. The softest sound was like a lash as it whipped and cracked over the people, disturbing them. Their deep sighs were laden with many meanings; their stares put forth horns and sharp edges.

'How long would he have resisted the sight of a beautiful woman such as you in his possession?'

Stunned, Sita could not grasp the words that emerged like a serpent shedding its skin with a hiss that churned through the crowd, disturbing them. A blinded crow flew screaming above Panchavati with no release from pain. Under a tree in full bloom a woman ran about shrieking helplessly, blood spraying all around. His head tilted slightly to the right, the man-vowed-to-a-single-wife smiled as he continued to act self-righteous!

'As for you—you stand before me as a woman whose chastity is suspect. As harmful as a lamp to a diseased eye are you to me. Henceforth you are nobody to me. So, bid me farewell and take refuge in any of the ten directions before you.'

By this time, Sita was in Mithila. Running around, jingling golden anklets on her small, fair, rounded feet. Mithila was filled with their sound. All the farms yielded plentiful harvests. There was abundant rain and bright sunshine over the ploughed land. The season of flowers was marked by extravagance. The fruits ripened without insect bites. Rivers filled and overflowed. There were peaceful valleys where birds sang without a break and the lambs pastured lazily. Filled with a sense of wonder and happiness, Janaka preserved the breast milk of the soil to feed Sita and a mattress of fresh green grass for her to sleep on.

'In order to wipe off the insult inflicted on me and my clan...'

In Ayodhya everyone always kept something hidden. The palace corridors reeked with the dark aura of this secret known to everyone, but not uttered by anyone in public. The dark shadows of endless curses wandered over Ayodhya. Sleep was disturbed by the knowledge that at all times, someone was aiming a hidden arrow at a wrong object.

'You may live with Lakshmanan, Bharatan, Sugrivan, or Vibhishanan...'

Suppressing the tears in her heart, Sita stood for a moment! Then she lifted her veil and looked unblinkingly at the Victor. She watched as his eyelids quivered before closing slowly. And, like a bell reverberating peacefully she said to Lakshmanan:

'Please prepare a fire for me.'

The crowds became restless and anxious and raised their voices, howling. Hair-splitting explanations of justice and law. Disgruntled voices and protests too. In the centre of Lanka the earth removed its veil and lay bare while the air filled with roaring sounds.

The seashore was bare. Mandodari stood alone on the sandy shore guarding the sacrificial rice offering, waiting for the death of the sun.

Lanka fell silent. Into that silence, the fire rose towering, hissing and roaring, spreading upwards. The eyes, minds, and intellects of the crowd converged to a single point. Once more, Sita looked intently, eyes glowing with an inner light, into the Victor's eyes. Sita realized that the earth that used to be wet and ready at his touch like the ploughed land at the onset of rains, was now dry and barren. Never again would his hands be able to rouse any feeling in the earth. Never again would a single kiss stir a shiver in the veins of the earth, nor from those shivers rouse the heady, wild fragrance of the forest. Now, forever the only thing to remember were his harsh words, rock hard slivers of stone flung at her, in broad daylight, in the presence of a crowd. She stepped into the pit of fire, her untouched body aware only of that moment's shiver of shock!

The daughter of earth stepped into the fire, her right foot first. I am Sita! The soil that quenches fire! From the beginning of time, I bear in my belly the rains showered on the soil. My mind is focused on the memory of unchanging rains to come in the future. The one who accepts rain and seeds, mixing them with fire to spread the cool, green spark of life. Around Sita the fire rose and spread, roaring. Once again, burnt pure, the earth lay shining, waiting for the rain and the seed.

Mother Clan

Claws that spread like sieves must be shaped, sharpened. Eyes as soft as flowers must be scratched and slit. Cheeks fluffed like fresh butter must be pierced and torn. Thunderbolts flashed in Soorpanakha's[1] eyes. Fire and lightning flared from her nails.

Let us set forth to battle.

Today is the day when women thirsting for revenge and children with rare visions step out of their houses, pounding the battle field, slay their enemies and scatter them around. Today is also the day when that thief must die at the hands of the mothers, he who lost all sensitivity and propriety had, sat amidst the enemy, pointed out his own flesh and blood and urged them to aim arrows at his own mother's birth throes.

The tips of her claws shone like sharpened knives. The ashes from her filed nails flew, raising a whirlwind.

Ravanan, the magnificent, cannot be conquered in combat. His prowess and his swòrd shining like the moon, cannot be arrested. His roar like the sound of the sea horn, sets the whole forest trembling. When he, the king of swords, marches forward angrily, even the Northern Mountain shudders. Nor in butchering the enemy can

his own sister, who grew up to the sounds of his bowstrings and war cries, be stopped. Her vengeance waited hissing on the dark path, its hood unfurled.

Soorpanakha gnashed her teeth. Seething with uncontrollable anger, panting, her nails scraped the rocks. Any movement brought shooting pains on both sides of her chest. Her breasts swelled with pain.

'Breasts?'

Soorpanakha shuddered. She stared at the bandaged wounds on her chest. An empty space beneath scraps of green medicinal paste! A place like a bare field after the harvest, so vast, so empty, so fruitless. Soorpanakha pulled out the stem of the wild grass and broke it, twisting it with her hands. Brutally she kicked aside the baby rabbit snuggling at her feet.

They butchered the root and source of my breast milk. The roots of my clan and blood! My breasts were full—round and black—like the graceful breasts of *Karimkali*[2] sculptured by *Maya*[3]. I have suckled three or four generations! Yet, when I stood before them, my heart filled with love, my breasts full and swaying, treacherously they drew the sword. To this day no one has ever done such a deed. In my forest, no man has shown such cruelty to any woman. Filled with passion, if a woman approaches a man and he is unable to fulfil her desire, he should speak to her as he would to a sister and show her another direction. King Ravanan had never lifted his sword to turn a woman's body into a barren land. No one in my clan has posed as a hero after destroying a woman's shape and form.

Soorpanakha lifted her face above the mass of black rocks. She wiped the tears trickling on her dark, shining cheeks with the back of her hand. Then, tossing her head, expanding her chest, swinging her anklets and belled waist ornaments, she strode proudly into the armoury.

In my armoury, in the Dandaka forest, I have carefully stored

axes hewn of stone, and spears for the tens of thousands of women whose eyes blaze like glowing cinders. To protect and strengthen them, there is Ayomukhi, the powerful. Ayomukhi who dances in the forest like a peacock during the monsoon. With a body as black and shining as gingelli seeds! As she walks, swinging her forest-thick hair shining with oil, darting her restless, fish-shaped eyes, the colour of dark clouds, swaying her hips and buttocks, even the great King Ravanan misses a step. She has the grace and beauty of Goddess Kali! Heavy breasts to suckle two or three generations of children! Even her, they did not simply beat, strike down, or wound with arrows. They didn't break her hands and legs and throw her in the forest; nor did they gouge her eyes out and send her running. They cut off the source of her breast milk. With blood spurting from her breasts and face, it was at Soorpanakha's feet that she fell. Her cries reaching all directions, she rolled on the ground and wept unceasingly. When I dragged her up from the ground, and stood face to face, it was the clan's honour that was completely shattered!

Two people! Two women whose bodies and femininity were despoiled! The mothers' anger rose boiling. The fire pits blazed and roared. The war drums and pipes rose in a shrieking wail. Unsheathing the swords stained with blood and twirling their anklets, both women were placed, facing each other, in the midst of these fires!

In the clay pots the sap of trees fermented and rose foaming. The children of the clan began to dance with slow, dragging steps. In the dramas of the clan, the questioning and trials began.

Who are these people walking in the Dandaka forest, carrying weapons? The womens' skirts made of coconut leaves swirled. Their waists and chests, which had the beauty of *arali*[4] flowers in bloom, rose and fell.

In our Dandaka forest, that does not foster war and revenge, who walks around, their bodies covered with weapons? In this forest,

where the earth cares for the tree, the tree is friendly with the form and the form likes and loves the man, who are these people swirling their weapons? Where do they come from?

Now, the war drums sounded in agitation and anger. The pipes sounded frenzied and deranged.

The tree blossoms because of passion. The forest blooms and the sea melts because of passion. If a woman's passion is denounced as wrong and harmful, it is the fruit-bearing earth which will suffer! Crazed with power, all sense of propriety lost, everything is spoiled. This is not good for our forest. The minds of outsiders are one and ours another.

On that day it was the mothers who beat the drums and blew the trumpets too! Defying prolonged injustice, beating the rhythm of the clan till the drums caught fire, and sowing the whirlwinds in the trumpets—were the mothers! Their hearts filled with sorrow, the people of the forest drank the tree-sap and danced with the mothers.

Soorpanakha gnashed her teeth. She pushed open the granite door of the armoury and took out a poison-tipped spear. She ran the tip of her index finger on the sharp edges of the spear and stood, deep in thought.

There are many weapons made of copper and iron in my people's worksheds—swords, spears, axes—an endless number of weapons. As for the arrows! King Ravanan is not fully aware of the strength of those arrows, that fell in the Dandaka forest like hail. Arrows pierced the chests of Kharan and other fighters and cut through to the other side, as they rushed, howling and holding their weapons aloft. In the time it takes to blink, those heroes fell like small mountains, their heads and torsos scattered, their chests and faces pitted with holes. I have no arrows that are as weightless as feathers, and can yet pierce rocks and speed off.

As the frightful holes that were left in the place of her nose began to quiver slowly, Soorpanakha stood still for a moment to retrieve the scent of the forest. Suddenly she swayed and then began

to single-mindedly distil and gather in the scent of the forest. The fragrance of the *champaka* flower[5]! Delicate, yet distinct at all times. The realization that she had not been completely alienated from the world of scents made her heart beat faster. A deep sorrow made her feel helpless. Damned scents! Go away! Soorpanakha waved her hands to drive those pervasive scents away. Soorpanakha knew that the fragrance of the blooming champaka flowers came from the banks of the Godavari. The same maddening fragrance that flowed occasionally to stir her femininity. At such times, she would run and run and run along the banks of the Godavari, her jewels jingling and her colourful skirt swirling in the wind, till she reached Panchavati[6] where the champaka blooms in all seasons.

She longed to distil and drink the fragrance-laden breeze of champaka flowers; to make garlands for her hair which looked like bees clustered; or to encircle her waist and breasts with bracelets made of champaka flowers. Finally, she longed to roll on the ground matted with champaka flowers.

There, a thousand swings made of twisted creepers lay suspended from the branches of *Neerkadambu* trees,[7] all for me. As I drank the fermented and foaming honey, swayed and jumped from one swing to the other, there were a thousand peacocks that spread their tails and danced with me. Whenever I came here the place filled me with an imaginary love that made my heart throb. Like the tree-sap frothing, I have trembled with love. It is here that I have giddily desired men that I have not lusted for earlier nor later. Every tree, peacock, creeper, plant, and deer of this place has wilted in the heat of my sighs.

The air of Panchavati is filled with the odour of my perspiration. My wetness has seeped into Panchavati's soil and filled it with a pleasant chill. The Godavari which embraces me with its red lotus fragrance is my mirror. A thousand times my rain-cloud lustre and playful movements have melted and merged with that river. My langorous eyes, my soft belly, my full breasts—I have seen all these

reflected in that mirror a thousand times and forgotten myself. This is my love-forest! Wherever I go, the fragrance of this forest arouses me. Every single tree in this forest is mine! My lover, who bursts into bloom only when I ask him to. On a thousand moonlit nights I have mated with this forest.

A dark moonlight crept into Soorpanakha's eyes. She shuddered at the thought of the blood-stained roads she covered when she ran from Panchavati, roaring in unbearable agony. Unconsciously her hands went to her breasts. She remembered that after her alienation from Panchavati, the fragrance of champaka blooms could not arouse her. Though it oppressed her heart with a wordless sorrow, it also slowly set fire to her seething anger. Suddenly she ran towards the banks of Godavari holding high the poison-tipped spear. Her heavy jewellery crafted of copper, silver, and gold clashed and jingled. The forest shivered apprehensively. The frightened animals and birds ran here and there, chattering and crying. The scents of Panchavati, waiting with outstretched arms to press to its breast the one who was returning after a long separation, poured oil into her anger that blazed like a fire. Swaying from one creeper to another, Soorpanakha ran and fell into the bosom of Panchavati. Seeing the silent, uninhabited thatched hut through the gap of the thick cluster of trees, she gnashed her teeth.

That was once a forest—a black-green forest—where my handsome, golden son sat and prayed. They came, cut and scattered the trees and cleared the forest. They killed my loved one too. They even threw away the idol of Siva he had so humbly worshipped. Over that, they built their hut of leaves.

With all her strength, Soorpanakha aimed and threw the spear at the thatched hut. Destroying on its way the leaves and grass and scattering them, the spear finally hit the mud walls of the thatched hut, and quivered right at the heart of the swastika[8] symbol drawn with *vaka*[9] leaves.

He severed the very roots of my clan; insulted my colour and

my class; despoiled my body and speech. I hear that even King Ravanan may suffer defeat at those hands which from behind a tree, hidden, aimed the arrow that killed Vali who attacked him. Ravanan's own brother, in his hunger to rule Lanka forgot his ties of blood and changed his loyalties to the enemy, bringing upon the great king, the misfortunes of time.[10] Now, in the field of war, the only company the king has are the mother clan, their tears and hearts full of sorrow!

Suckling honey and tree-sap from a bamboo cone, Soorpanakha's eyes turned red. Swaying, she walked aimlessly between the trees of Panchavati. Afraid to look into the mirror of Godavari, she moved away from its banks. Yet, at times she reclined against a swing and listened to the lullaby of the river, her heart heavy with pain, her big eyes brimming with tears.

I used to sleep on the banks of Godavari like a daughter on her mother's lap. Now, with a heavy heart I change my tracks to stay away from her, wandering aimlessly. But, still I realize that the blood from my breasts has mingled with Godavari's waters turning it muddy and red.

The moon rose. The night turned terrible. The forest began to make the night uneasy with its murmurs and moans. Ayomukhi searched for Soorpanakha in the courtyard of the armoury.

The armoury of the ironmonger was open. The weapons lay scattered, uncared for. Where has Soorpanakha gone? She told me that she would wait for me after preparing the poison and applying it on all the weapons. In any case what could she be waiting for now? Ayomukhi sat on the looming black rocks and gazed into the darkness with eyes that reflected the bitterness of defeat. As the night wore on, the moaning of the jackals and the chattering of the night birds stirred an uneasy feeling in her. After a long time, in the moonlight and in the shadows, at times hazy, at times clear, she saw the figure of Soorpanakha approaching, staggering, and jumped from the rocks and ran down to meet her. Soorpanakha's

legs could not hold her upright and she was about to fall. Raising her hands she forbade Ayomukhi from speaking. Ayomukhi supported Soorpanakha on her strong shoulders and held her.

Both of them lay down in the courtyard before the armoury staring at the dark moonlight, not uttering a word. Above them, the wild turkeys flew, casting their dark shadows. As the moonlight lit up Soorpanakha's face revealing her unblinking eyes brimming with tears, Ayomukhi started to speak slowly.

Lanka is destroyed!
The sun has set!
In the battlefield, Ravanan
who fought his enemies
With the ferocity of a thunderbolt
Among the dark clouds—
And his ceremonial round moon-umbrella
are all shattered.

Soorpanakha did not utter a word. Nor did she prevent Ayomukhi from talking. Watching the moonlight turning red and the blood of King Ravanan mingling with the foaming waters of Godavari, she lay unmoving.

Not a single woman came!

Not even one from the ten thousand!

Fearing Vibhishanan!

That dragonfly who wears the round moon-umbrella, stands in Ravanan's blood boiling and flowing all around! Ravanan, the king who had the glow and strength of a thousand suns.

Soorpanakha shivered like a leaf in the wind. She thrust aside Ayomukhi's comforting hands.

Again, both of them lay down for a long time staring silently at the moonlight. The night and the moonlight turned dark. The most silent quarter of the night began when the forest animals lay in a stupor.

Suddenly Soorpanakha asked:
'Cheetha?' (Sita)
Ayomukhi spoke in a whisper as though sharing a secret.

They did not cut off
Her nose and breasts
But, for the sin of
having spent her days
fearful, weeping,
In King Ravanan's garden
They prepared a blazing coal-fire
And asked her to jump into it!

Suddenly, Soorpanakha roared with laughter! The forest woke up with a shiver. The birds and beasts began to whimper. The forest trembled as though someone had squeezed and stretched its boundaries. Hands pressed behind her, head thrown back, and shoulders shaking, Soorpanakha laughed with abandon, louder and louder.

What is Not in the Story

Right through the journey, someone was behind them. They felt someone was following them, walking when they walked; stopping when they stopped. But, when they turned to look, there was only the forest, its hair loosened and spread out. Even the single-file path they had just covered was blurred.

The Sage's concentration slackened. At times the children who were walking ahead of him turned to ask, 'Who is following us?'

'No one, walk on,' the Sage would reply.

This conversation was repeated several times. On one occasion, Lavan took an arrow and hooked it into the bow.

'No, don't,' said the Sage.

'The forest paths do not belong to any one person. Others may wish to walk on the same path we have to take,' added Kusan.

However, with each step they took, the children turned and looked back anxiously. Seeing their agitation, the Sage said:

'Let us rest for a while before we continue the journey.'

That was in a grove of very old *ilanji*[1] trees. The ground beneath was covered with freshly fallen flowers. The sage opened his arms and embraced the flowers that were like his siblings. The children

too paid their respects to the flowers, bowing deeply and bringing their palms together. The flowers were the reciprocal pledge that the trees offered.

The small branches pointed to a throne of roots by touching them. Valmiki sat on that throne. He was very tired. He felt that he was worrying too much about the children.

The children sat some distance away without disturbing him on saddles formed by roots. The ride on horseback did not seem to excite them. It was unclear whether the thought that affected them was fear or sorrow. Naimisaranyam[2] lay far ahead. They had already travelled a great distance away from their mother. The twilight time signified the separation from the one dearest to them. Kusan was the most sorrowful.

'My feeling that someone is following us might just be imaginary, isn't it?' he asked. Suddenly Lavan's horse leapt up and galloped.

'Whoever it is, I...'

Kusan restrained him. 'Don't be hasty. You are always in a hurry. It was this same haste that led Dasarathan to shoot the arrow that killed the sage's son.'

Lavan reined in his horse which raised its front legs, neighed and stopped running. He looked at his brother and laughed as though seeking forgiveness.

'We heard a song, didn't we, an unusual note?' asked Kusan.

'Yes, we did. Along with the song there was the rhythm of a forest drum too.'

'Is it truly a song?'

At that point Valmiki called them to him.

'Recall the next verse and recite.'

Facing the sage the children sat cross-legged. They remembered their mother. As they had set off, bidding mother goodbye, she had stood under the banyan tree in the ashram courtyard. She looked as though she was trapped amidst the swaying roots of the banyan tree. The farther they moved away from her, the more afraid they

were that the roots would bind and strangle her. They closed their tear-filled eyes and recited the next verse:

Hearing Lakshmanan's words
Janakan's daughter wailed aloud
Gripped by melancholy
She, Vaidehi collapsed, Ah!

Ending their recital, the children asked:

'Thatha!'[3]

'At that time how did mother cry?'

'How was she? Did she place her hands on her head or on her breasts? Where?'

The Sage spoke:

'Children!'

'Because she was seated on the banks of the Ganga, the ground was soft. As for her grief it was as intense as the volcanic explosion that turns rock to molten lava. She wailed piercingly placing her hands on her head.'

The children lay on the earth, face down.

Searching for his calf all over the forest Unni lost his way. He who had thought that he could leave the forest before dark, moved steadily into the middle of the dense forest even as it grew darker. Seeing neither the calf nor his way out of the forest he grew despondent. Unni was unhappy believing that wild beasts would have killed and eaten the calf. So great was his love for the calf as dear to him as life renewed.

'Unni, take good care of it,' had been his father's words as he had given it to him. Along with Unni's life father had reclaimed the gift of a hundred cows.

Now Unni's calf was lost. And he, Unni too was lost in the forest. As the daylight faded, the forest was filled with noises so frightening that it could freeze the blood of people who were not native to the

forest. Unni stumbled about running hither and thither. He wandered, calling out to his calf. Growing sorrowful he placed his hands on his head and howled. But each cry struck every tree and leaf and returning, surrounded him. Forest creepers wound about Unni entrapping him. As for the big trees, they stood rooted and close to one another, giving him no inch to move forward. At last Unni fell, overcome by fear, hunger, thirst, weariness, and grief.

The slightest sound of feet on dry leaves made Unni shiver. Could it be a leopard? Or a wolf? Whoever it was, nothing worse could happen to him. Aren't you the animals that ate my calf? Unni closed his eyes tight.

Eat me too.

Thus an hour crept by. Two hours ... three ... four ... each second seemed as long as several hours to him and he stretched supine on the ground as though for an oil massage. Unni could not sleep.

As he lay there he thought he heard the sound of a small drum. He sat up, listening carefully. Like memory emerging from forgetfulness, the drumbeats drew closer and closer. However, when he opened his eyes, he couldn't see anything other than stabbing darkness. Faint but unmelodious like the hoarse cry of a cricket, along with the drumbeat, Unni heard the start of a song. He forgot the perils of the forest and his own fears and began to walk in the dark, stopping every now and then and groping his way forward.

The younger brother had accidentally stepped on the forest fire. And his feet scorched. Even as his sister plucked medicinal herbs, crushed them in the palm of her hands and applied the juice on the burnt part, she scolded him; for being careless when they were going on an important mission. It was he who held the small drum. As his pain heightened, the drumbeats faltered.

'Here, eat this.'

She gave him a piece of the *appam*[4] made out of powdered wild rice and some roasted meat.

'After you eat this, sit on my shoulders. I can walk very fast. Otherwise, we won't reach there on time.'

After he finished eating, his sister lifted and placed him on her shoulders. She was so small that his feet trailed on the ground. Apart from his weight, she was carrying a packet of eatables. In her left hand she held a long stick at the end of which hung a hollowed out gourd filled with water. While walking and running she asked him:

'Hasn't mother told us that we should not stop singing? I am the only one singing. Why aren't you singing?'

'If I start, I will feel like crying.'

'Crying.... I too feel like crying. Wasn't mother crying when she sang all these songs to us? But, we have to sing and sing and open up our voices. That won't happen if you cry. Do you know that they may not let us in. Then, if we have to stand outside, won't we have to sing in a loud voice to be heard?'

'I can't, Akka[5]. I ... Even now I see before my eyes *Appa's*[6] head severed from his body'.

Suddenly, he leapt down from his sister's shoulders and embraced her closely. She too threw down everything else and with a shiver held him close.

Even now the children felt that they were in the centre of a whirlwind of human voices raised in victory crying, 'Sambooka is killed'. Around them the forest swirled. The ground shook and trembled. People swarmed all over rushing like a mountain stream, roaring, breaking the branches of trees, splitting rocks, beating and driving out animals and birds. When they saw their mother in the red glow of burning torches, what she carried wrapped in a big leaf was not a bundle of honey or cereals. Dipped in spurting thickened blood was their father's head. That head severed from the body by a single stroke flew and fell at their mother's feet! His hair and beard, white as snow, was now sticky with blood.

Beating the trees, blowing trumpets, throwing fire and burning the forest, people rushed and assembled. They took an oath to burn the city. Many held their heads in their hands, weeping and cursing.

On the altar in the centre of the burning forest, father's head was placed reverentially. His eyes were only half shut. When the children cried aloud at the blood on his teeth, their mother covered their mouths. Sambooka will never die. Chanting these words people brought father's body in. Father's arms and legs were thin and shrivelled like the twigs of a tree. His stomach had caved in and was stuck to his spine. His ribs stood out. Father was naked! As that body was joined with the head there was a thunderous beating of drums and raised voices.

'There is no death for Sambooka, the *gnani*[7].'

Carefully stored in the girl's memory without the slightest change was all that she had seen and heard on that day. Gathering all her strength she now cried aloud:

'There is no death for Sambooka, the gnani.'

Though feeble, heavy echoes of her voice resounded through the forest. She called aloud once again and when she continued to repeat her words over and over, louder and louder, waiting for stronger reechoes, the boy was afraid. He began to shake her.

'Stop, stop. When will we meet that writer?'

'I don't know.' She panted a reply. 'We will meet him somewhere, while we wander around singing.'

He took the drum in his hands. A cricket began its endless screeching, piercing the vitals of the night.

In the densest part of the forest, the Sage and the children stood, unable to move even a foot ahead. It was late in the night. The sage decided that they could proceed only after dawn as it was dangerous to walk on that part of the banks of the Ganga covered by slippery rocks. There were no trees around, only a few small thickets. As it was the week of the full moon, the moonlight fell, turning the waters of Ganga silver. The crickets, the bats, the night birds, and a hundred thousand other small insects chattered without a break.

Kusan and Lavan gathered twigs and lit a fire. The Sage instructed them to build it up to the height of a human being.

In the grassy slopes on the bank of the river, leopards could be

hiding stealthily. Along with the children, the Sage also collected twigs and dry leaves. As he gazed at the leaping fire, Kusan said:

'Thatha!'

'The song that we thought we heard earlier, what is it? Could the singers be human, semi-divine beings or spirits?'

Valmiki replied:

'That was indeed a human voice.'

Kusan asked again:

'Everyone names you as the first poet. Then how can there be this song?'

Valmiki replied: 'It is born of sorrow alone! The world is full of people filled with sorrow. Each life is a poem. I am forced to see the future. This forest, the river, the fog, the cool air, and the forest life... all these will fade away! Like the rivers drying up, compassion will also evaporate from human hearts. Writing gives only a brief description of time, and all that I know and have to say, I may not be able to say. The future is going to be crueller. Sorrow will never evoke poetry.'

For a long time the Sage and his disciples sat doing nothing but listening to the awesome sound of the Ganga. Every now and then they could distinctly hear the sounds made by dry leaves and twigs as they crackled in the heat of the fire. The smoke and heat filling the cold air made it pleasant, yet, they were filled with a nameless unease. After some time they thought they could hear a faint drumbeat from the forest piercing even the awesome sound of the Ganga. As they listened, the sound seemed to come closer and closer.

'It is they, the new singers'.

Lavan jumped up.

'Let them see us.'

Kusan stoked the fire building it to the height of a man. In the light of the fire they saw a small girl standing, tired, carrying on her shoulders a boy taller than her. Her eyes looked like that of a

frightened animal. Still she seemed to be preparing to defend herself. With a gentle smile the Sage called out to her and beckoned her to come to him. She came forward at a crawl, moving two or three feet. Once she lowered the weight from her shoulders, she crumpled and fell. The Sage got up and lifted her in his arms. Kusan lifted the child with burnt feet to his shoulders. Lavan brought some water in a leaf shaped like a vessel and slaked their thirst.

The Sage asked, 'Who are you? Who wrote this song in such simple language? Where are the palm leaves on which these songs were written?'

The children said, 'This is not a song. Those words were not composed by anyone. There are no palm leaves. This is a lament. That is the sobbing sound that was heard all over the forest and emerged from the she-bird that cried out when the hunter felled one of the two love birds.'

Valmiki sighed, 'You are the children of the noble Sambooka, aren't you?'

The girl stood up with a quick movement. She looked intently at the Sage. In the moonlight, she saw Sambooka's gaze reflected in the wet eyes of the Sage.

'You are the writer, aren't you, and these are Sita's children.'

Valmiki caressed her head.

She asked, 'Writer, why didn't you give us a place in your writing?'

For the first time, during the journey through the forest, Valmiki fell into a deep meditation. He withdrew the five sense organs. Slowly a termite hill grew around him and covered him.

Lavan and Kusan divided the food into four portions.

Lavan said, 'We know the story of Sambooka. In Naimisaranyam we are going to sing that too.'

Kusan fell into a deep reverie. He looked at the meditating poet for a long time and said with a sigh.

We know only the story that the poet sang. In between gulping

and swallowing the food because of her hunger, the girl said, 'We are also going to Naimisaranyam. In the hall of sacrifice we are going to sing the story of Sambooka.'

Kusan placed his hands on the shoulders of the little girl and said:

'Sing your song. It will be very different. Let us hear it.'

The children threw more twigs and dried leaves into the fire. All four of them moved and sat closer to the fire. The girl began to sing Sambooka's story in her piercing voice.

They did not realize the passage of time or that the fire had sunk low. The balance of justice kept swinging between them from opposing directions. The moon blazed and shone like a red brass plate. In the last quarter of the night the girl concluded her story.

'Can the *Yugadharma*[8] settle the debts of death through killing?'

Valmiki did not wake up. The termite hill had by now covered him up to his forehead. Placing his small drum on the ground, the boy with burnt feet asked:

'Couldn't they have taken a child for a child and revived the Brahmin boy through me?'

Kusan felt very uneasy. These questions without answers, why were they all being raised, and subdued within the termite hill?

'Writer', the girl called out in a loud voice, 'Why was our old father killed instead of us?'

In the midst of the fire, the nerves of the dead leaves were crushed and squashed. The twigs broke like the spinal bone. From somewhere behind, the heaving and sobbing of a fifth person was heard by the children. They turned their heads together and looked. It was Unni.

He had listened to the story.

'That was me. The Brahmin boy was me.' He wailed as if his heart would break.

The children sat astounded, unable to say anything. Unni was very tired. He was smaller than the others. Even before Kusan advanced to hold him, he fell into Kusan's arms.

'My calf is lost. I have been searching for it. Wasn't Sambooka killed because of me? Please take my life.'

Unni covered his face and sobbed. In between his sobs he called the name of his calf.

The girl asked in disgust, 'Oho! So you are the precious child? You lay safely in your tub of oil till Sambooka's head was cut off!'

Unni sobbed piteously.

'I did not know the way back home.'

He didn't stop crying even though Lavan and Kusan tried to console him. The girl got up, went to him and pulled his hand. When she touched him, Unni squirmed as though he had been touched by fire. She tightened her hold on his hands in a cruel manner.

'You must be hungry. That is why you are moaning like this.'

She took out an appam made of wild rice and made him hold it.

'Eat it.'

Unni refused it by clamping his teeth and closing his lips.

'You must eat this.' She roared like a leopard. Unni shivered with fright and slowly began to eat the cake. When it got stuck in his dry throat, she gave him water. She also rubbed his chest. The children watched Unni finishing the cake, tears streaming down his cheeks all the time. For a long time the only sound heard was that of the dried leaves burning, caught in the fire. She pointed out a smooth warm stone near the fire and told Unni:

'Go to sleep.'

Unni did not move.

'Didn't you hear what I said?' She tried to make him lie down using force. In a feeble, frozen voice Unni said:

'I won't be able to sleep. I am one who is already dead. The pain of returning to life from death is unbearable.'

'To come to life from a source other than the mother's womb! The loneliness of it is terrible. After that I have not slept.'

Beyond the fire the children stared at Unni's unemotional face.

'Unni!'

That was the Sage who came out of his meditation. He came forward and sat next to them. He held the children close to himself.

'O writer!'

'From the sleep in the oil tub, why did you bring me back to this pain of wakefulness, of never being able to sleep?' Unni asked, his tears overflowing. Valmiki sighed, 'The ability to write does not at any time become an inalienable right, Unni.'

Unni moaned, 'I want my calf back.'

'It will be given back to you. In the morning we shall take you to the borders of the forest.' The Sage told him.

Did Unni get his calf back? Perhaps he did. Till his next death he may have lived suffering the pain of sleeplessness. In Naimisaranyam, Sita's sons recited the Ramayanam and they were the focus of the eyes and ears of all who listened, says the narrator of the epic. But what we do not have any information about is Sambooka's children. Did they reach Naimisaranyam? After the recital of the poet's version did they sing their version of Sambooka's story?

We do not hear anything of them in history, epics, or even oral folklore.

Jathiguptan and Janakiguptan

After that, all that Jathiguptan wanted to do was, to reach home, bathe, eat a meal, and stretch his back. Twenty days of severe, constipation! In the afternoon at a quarter past two, when the stomach emptied with a great explosion, upon my mother, Jathiguptan laughed!

When, eager to share this feeling of temporary relief with his wife, Janakiguptan, Jathiguptan reached his bedroom all he saw was Janakiguptan rushing out, shrieking. Though slightly shocked at first, the very next moment Jathiguptan ran behind her to cover her mouth. While doing so, he collided with his P.A. and fell down. The alarmed P.A. helped Jathiguptan get up; stroking the cheek he had been slapped on, the P.A. stood abashed, and mumbled the single word, 'Sir.'

Jathiguptan growled, 'Go and get her.' Having hurt his right hip in the fall, for the rest of his life he walked with a limp (like a fascist).

The P.A. returned and informed him that Janakiguptan had run into the storeroom and locked herself up, unresponsive to any calls. From somewhere a flashlight shone. 'Madam's flight has

been captured on film. The photograph will be printed in the newspapers linking it to the explosion,' added the P.A.

Jathiguptan felt very tired. And also very sleepy. As though collapsing from the weariness that followed the explosion, he dropped into bed. Before shutting his eyes he ordered his P.A.

'See to it that there is no more screaming from her. Remember, if the first scream takes place here, inevitably the last scream will also have to be from here.'

Jathiguptan closed his eyes with a finality.

His wife was prone to attacks of hysteria. Then, she would rest only after battering him or herself into a pulp. What would she not be doing today, in that storeroom! She would mix and stir salt, chillies, and kerosene together. Oh! The moment he thought of kerosene, Jathiguptan couldn't help remembering the matchbox too. In attempting to jump off his bed Jathiguptan fell asleep. He had believed that today his sleep would be free from constipation-induced nightmares. But, the nightmare found its way and walked in as usual.

The location of the nightmare was a wild forest. Time, midnoon; he, Jathiguptan was walking through that forest (for shame, without any clothes) and behind him walked Janakiguptan (she too was nude). That forest was a sacred place where elephants, bears, lions, leopards, deer, and peacocks, lived side by side in peace and amity. In that forest, was a leopard. It stared at Jathiguptan and stood facing him. To put it correctly, Jathiguptan's penis was exactly before the leopard's nose. Immediately, Jathiguptan tried to cover his shame with a sword that hung from his waist-cord. Not covering it completely, he stood there feeling ashamed. What a leopard! It did not take its eyes off Jathiguptan.

Meanwhile, weary from walking along the forest paths filled with potholes, Janakiguptan was resting under a tree and watching. A detached view of Jathiguptan seemed a vulgar sight, standing as he was born, nude, with weapons such as bow, arrow, sword, and

stick hanging from his hands, legs, shoulders, and waist. The leopard too was as naked as he was born. But, since he did not try to hide his object of shame, we don't know where it was. Soon, giving up her detachment and viewing the scene like a chaste wife, she was afraid that the leopard would defeat Jathiguptan. Would Jathiguptan's defeat affect his chaste wife? Or would the fruit of his karma affect him alone? Unmindful of the outcome, Janakiguptan raised her hand and shouting, 'shoo, shoo' drove the leopard away.

As Jathiguptan tried to sleep, his head on Janakiguptan's lap, she asked in an irritated tone, 'Can't you take off all those stupid weapons before you lie down to sleep?'

Jathiguptan did not answer. Instead he smiled a secret, smug smile. Knowing that the smile implied 'What do you know?' Janakiguptan looked at the forest and thought to herself:

> Why weapons
> in a forest
> Why a kingly manner
> If your goal is penance.[1]

Jathiguptan sat up. 'What did you say?'

Janakiguptan explained clearly, 'Because of your passion for weapons, in Kaliyuga[2] you will suffer from severe constipation.'

Caressing the sword hanging over his shame, Jathiguptan laughed, mocking her.

Sadly, Janakiguptan stood up and took a few steps. She stopped as though she had slipped and turned. And said:

> Beloved husband, look at this forest?
> Here live only gentle sages,
> Their young ones and dependants,
> Play not with swords
> But with the fruits of *marotti*[3] trees only
> Look at the trees laden with

Clusters of fruits green and ripe
Roots too there are in plenty
Can you see the forest in full bloom
The gentle, harmless animals
Birds flying, so calm and peaceful
Every lake with lotuses in full bloom
Clear water, on the banks, ducks
walking flip flop
Mountain streams falling
Spattering gracefully....

At that point Janakiguptan stopped her recital and came rushing towards Jathiguptan. 'In such a place why are you walking around carrying the baton, sword, and broad knife? Are you mad?'

Even though all this was happening in a dream, Jathiguptan wanted to wake up, unable to bear the shame of standing naked with just a sword hanging from his waist-cord. He had to give up the attempt because of a small bird that flew in and began circling his head. Once in a while it poked at his head. 'Go away, bird, go away,' Jathiguptan said, trying to push it away; but, even in his sleep, he could hear the bird chattering in his ears, 'No clothes ... no clothes.'

In the dark, Jathiguptan groped for his clothes, but couldn't find them. 'What sort of a bird is this? Do ordinary birds chirp, You have no clothes, no clothes.' Once again, 'No clothes ... no clothes. Chee, chee, bird, where are you pecking me?'

Jathiguptan got up and ran covering his front. The bow *gandeevam*[4], hanging from his waist cord proved to be a nuisance. Many times it crashed against the sides of his cot causing him to fall face down. The bird was pursuing him. Hearing the flutter of its wings he turned around only to see a burning forest[5] advancing on him, pushing the bird in front. The fire had a mouth like the huge opening to the nether world. Frightened shrieks emerged, gasping for breath. The sound of animal skulls cracking. The sizzling sound of burning flesh. The nerves of leaves crackling. Grass singed and burning.

This was not a nightmare that would disappear in a trice. Jathiguptan decided to wake up with a start. The bird wouldn't give up. It insisted, 'You needn't wake up now. First dress properly. Aren't you groping on the cot for clothes or at least a shawl?' In the end, he began a strenuous effort to cover his shame with the bow, gandeevam. Alas! He could not lift the bow. The bird mocked him.

'Wasn't it for this bow that you burnt the forest? And now, when you need it so urgently, it is of no use to you...'

The bird was a bit too smart for him. Jathiguptan changed his strategy.

'The cupboard where the clothes are stored is in Janaki's custody. The key is tied to her upper cloth.'

And then, without giving the bird a chance to retort he woke up with a great upheaval. 'Bhoom!' The P.A. who was waiting sleepless rushed in.

'Sir....'

'.....'

'Rumours, Sir.'

'Has it spread?'

'Yes, Sir, it has spread.'

'How far?'

'Crossed the boundary, Sir.'

Sleep vapourized from Jathiguptan's mind. A case that will roll heads. The P.A. explained that the rumour was that Janakiguptan, deeply pained at Jathiguptan's moves, had declared her loyalty to the global human race and had imprisoned herself in the storeroom vowing to fast unto death. The P.A. did not know who had invented this rumour. The rumour also spelt out that Janakiguptan had decided to live in the company of flies, rats, and spiders in the store-room till she died. She, an asthma patient, would stay in that dark, dingy room, enduring the dank air and the pungent smells of salt, chillies, and coriander, thus punishing herself for the sake of the whole world. Against all explosions—from constipation to the

atom bomb—the country's awakened soul was protesting in that storeroom.

Oh, God! Jathiguptan ran towards the storeroom beating his head with his hands. He struck, kicked, and hammered at the door. The response of a bolted door. Against all odds, gathering himself, he moved to kick the door open. He raised his leg ... when from all directions shone flashlights from a camera blinding him. A golden fly pierced his eyeballs.

The P.A. said:

'Sir, this door is now the symbol of the conscience of the country. You should not act unwisely. Can't you feel the presence of hidden cameras in the walls? Rearing to flash; not only that, you are naked.'

Jathiguptan started. What was happening? Dream and reality were mixing. He covered his front and escaped, running.

The truth was the nightmare he had seen. The key to the clothes cupboard was tied to Janakiguptan's sari. The clothes he had worn the previous day had already been put into the washing machine, now cranked by the servant woman. Oh God! What will he wear to step out?

When the P.A. knocked, Jathiguptan ordered through the key hole.

'Take off your necktie and hand it over to me.'

'I haven't worn a necktie, Sir.'

'Haven't I instructed you to always be in uniform?'

'There are more dangerous concerns, Sir. Outside, there is a furore, with people holding up Madam's photographs. If Madam chooses to be a martyr, the people may finish you off. So, for two days, please do not step out.'

The P.A. locked the door from the outside and left. Jathiguptan thought, this is betrayal, anarchy. He had to get rid of Janu. At the very least, lose her in the Thar desert. Otherwise, she would brush him aside and become an important person. Even now the rumour had spread that she did not suffer (like him) from constipation.

Jathiguptan had to decide what to do with his wife. He opened his cupboard, took out his gun, and hung it on his waist-cord. Sleep would bring nightmares. So, he tried to keep awake. But, at the last moment, when he allowed himself to sleep, the nightmare crept back through that crevice.

This nightmare was on the banks of a river. There, Jathiguptan stood tall, stretching to his full height, swirling a *gada*[6]. He was intimidated by his own shadow. The hum of the gada in use could be heard from miles beyond. On the opposite bank of the river stood five tents, burning. So, there was enough light. The red light fell on the river and shone. It was then that the servant woman arrived with the soiled clothes. Hadn't she been instructed not to wash clothes at night? Wasn't the washing machine bought for that? To say the least, should she not have some respect for those burning tents? The servant woman began to wash, slapping the clothes against the wash-stone. Jathiguptan increased the speed of the swirling gada. The swooshing sound in the air disturbed the woman and she faltered. Disgusted, she threw the clothes on the stone, straightened herself, and said:

'What do you think you are doing, Sir, standing nude and swirling that useless thing?'

'Weren't all the young and newborn children killed so that five stupid aging men could go on living?'

'After all that, you still continue to swirl that weapon? Sir, do me a favour and go away. Let me wash these clothes.'

Jathiguptan wanted to crack her head open with the gada. But, he hesitated. 'Let her finish washing my clothes. After that....'

The maid servant said:

'These are not your clothes, Sir. They are the clothes Janaki Amma wore in her period.'

As he threw the gada away and kept running Jathiguptan woke up, on the dawn of the fourth day.

How true are nightmares! When he peeped through the key

hole to find out who was knocking at the door, Jathiguptan saw Janakiguptan, after her ritual bath at the end of the four-day period, her face glowing, from the turmeric face pack. While Jathiguptan stood in agony, not having visited the toilet for four days, Janakiguptan opened the door and came in. 'What is this? Why are you standing, naked?' She asked.

'Couldn't you have asked me for the keys of the cupboard?'

Giving the naked man a *lungi*[7] to cover himself, she continued, 'Wear that lungi and come along.'

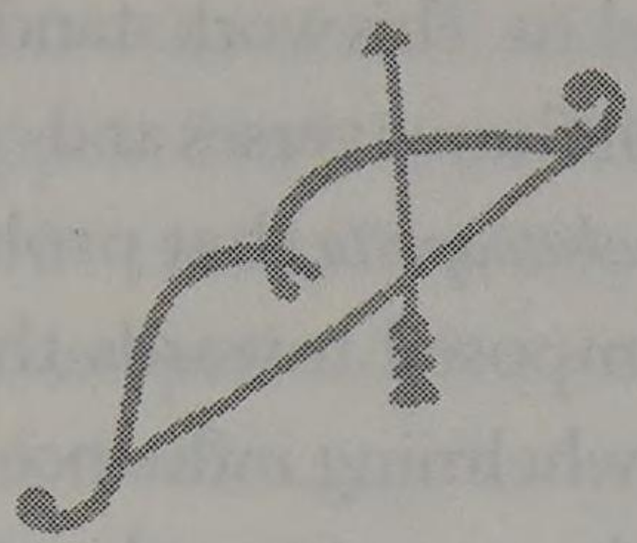
Jathiguptan threw the lungi aside and shouted, 'Why did you lock yourself inside the storeroom?'

'Shouldn't there be a change in the routine of the monthly isolation?' She cooed coyly.

'What about the protests being staged outside on your behalf?' Jathiguptan wanted to ask.

Or are they too only as routine as her bath after the monthly period?

Anyway, for him the chief concern now would be the constipation that he would have to endure. Trembling, Jathiguptan closed the door of the toilet.



Afterword
The *Ramayana* in Kerala

Malayalam has its own Ramayana subtradition. One may consider *Ramacharitam*, probably written in twelfth century AD, to be the earliest of the Ramayanas in Malayalam. Composed in indigenous metres with the specific features of the prosody in Dravidian language, *Ramacharitam* consisting of 1814 quartrains in 164 sections is a perfect model of the *pattu* (literally, song) genre. It is a free rendering of the *Yuddhakanda* of Valmiki's Ramayana. The author Cheeraman, often identified with a king of Travancore on insufficient grounds, shows considerable poetic skill and absolute command over the poetic language full of Tamilisms. The hero here is even more prominent than in Valmiki and the style, grander. The dominant *rasa* is *veera*. *Ramacharitam* shows some influence also of the *Adhyatma Ramayana* in Sanskrit and *Kampa Ramayana* in Tamil. By the time *Kannassa Ramayanam* was composed—probably around the fifteenth century—Malayalam had become more sanskritized and closer to contemporary Malayalam. This is again a *pattu* rendering of the Valmiki Ramayana in 3059 quatrains. This is the first complete Ramayana in Malayalam. Niranam Ramapaniker, also known as Kannassa, has condensed the original in certain portions and added to it portions translated

from other works in Sanskrit. This work stands out among Ramayanas in Malayalam for its mellifluous verses and charming word-pictures. Ayyappilla Asan's *Ramakathapattu* that probably followed *Kannassa Ramayanam* and was composed towards the close of the fifteenth century, shows an overwhelming influence of the colloquial Tamil spoken in the bilingual areas of Southern Travancore. This text was often recited in Vaishanava temples in south Kerala to the accompaniment of a small drum called *chandravalayam*. Told in 3163 verses in 279 parts, this version of the Rama story never attained great popularity despite some of its beautiful descriptive passages.

Ramayana Champu attributed to Punam Namputhiri who probably lived in the latter half of the fifteenth century, is the culmination of the highly sanskritized *Manipravalam* tradition in the language. It is divided into twenty books beginning with the birth of Ravana (*Ravanotbhavam*) and ending with the ascension of Rama to heaven (*Swargarohanam*). It is composed chiefly in Sanskrit metres interspersed with short pieces of indigenous metres taken for varieties of prose. The high-flown style reminds the informed reader of Bhoja's *Ramayana Champu* or Anantha Bhatta's *Bharata Champu*. It is also full of quotations from Sanskrit classics as it was intended as a text for *Pathakam*, a one-man dramatic performance held in temples. The work foregrounds the aesthetic rather than the religious aspect. The humorous, the erotic, and the dramatic are evoked in abundance. The well-made verse, the evocative poetry, and the perfect blend of diverse stylistic components charm the reader beyond measure.

However, it was Thunchathu Ezhuthachan's *Adhyatma Ramayanam* that went on to become the most popular of all the Ramayanas in Malayalam and is read in several Hindu homes even today. Ezhuthachan (literally meeting 'the father of writing' is a caste-name for rural teachers) is the father-figure in Malayalam literature; he firmly established the contemporary Malayalam poetic style. Composed in the middle of the sixteenth century, it has transcended the barriers of religion as the work is a classic dear to all Malayalees

and inevitably part of the school and college syllabus. The Sanskrit *Adhyatma Ramayana* is supposed to be a portion of *Brahmanda Purana* and consists of 4200 verses in 64 cantos. It attained prominence as a Bhakti text expounding the *advaita* philosophy. Ezhuthachan being a *soodra* not supposed to sing the divine song, has presented the tale as being narrated by a parrot. Ezhuthachan's work is by no means a translation; it is full of additions, deletions, alterations, and embellishments. He has introduced several hymns and ethical and philosophical discourses. He adapts indigenous metres to suit the moods conveyed in different *kandas*. The style is racy, fluent with a native flavour and often attains the heights of inspired utterance. Vivid descriptions, bold portrayal of characters, dramatic dialogues, and structured narration interspersed with philosophical discussions together made this Ramayana phenomenally popular. It is the work of a *bhakta*, leaving little scope for criticizing Rama, though the *Uthara Ramayanam* does have tragic aspects.

Another Ramayana in Malayalam is the twenty-four *Vritham* that used to be attributed to Ezhuthachan, but scholars have disproved this, pointing to its faulty usages and obscene passages. The work narrates the Rama story in different metres in 800 *slokas* some of which do have great emotional appeal and a sweet syntactical simplicity. *Kerala Varma Ramayanam* is a simple and faithful translation of the first five cantos of Valmiki Ramayana done by the young prince, Kerala Varma, in the eighteenth century. The story of Rama from his birth to his coronation is told with great imaginative power, semantic skill, and verbal felicity in twenty-one *sargas* by Azhakathu Padmanabha Kurup in his neo-classical *Ramachandra Vilasam* that was the first Mahakavya in Malayalam in the Sanskrit mode. *Ramanattam*, the *Ramayanam Attakkatha* written by Kottarakkara Tampuran in the latter half of the seventeenth century, divides the narrative into eight episodes that can be acted out independently in the *Kathakali* form.

There are scores of other Ramayanas in Malayalam, of uneven poetic quality like *Ramayana Manjari* by Oduvil Sankaran Kutty

Menon, *Bhasha Ramayana Champu* by Kadathanatt Krishna Variyar, *Ramayanam Attakkatha* by Mannanthala Neelakantan Moose, *Ramayanam Drama* by Nalukettil Krishna Menon, besides several *Ramayanam thullalkathas* (meant for stage performance), and *vanchippattus* (boatsongs) *tharattu* (lullaby), *pattus* (songs) like *kalampattu; ammanapattu oonjalpattu* and *kaikottikkalippattu* and *samkshepas* (summaries). *Balaramayanam* by Kumaran Asan is a simple poetic narration of the tale, hailed as a children's classic. Among the translations, special mention may be made of Dr S. K. Nair's translation of Kampan's Tamil Ramayana and Vennikkulan Gopalakurup's translation of Tulsidas' *Ramcharitmanas.* There are several texts that belong to the repertoire of classical theatrical forms in Kerala like *Koothu* and *Koodiyattam*, *Ramayanam Prabandham*, and adaptations of Sanskrit plays like Bhasa's *Abhisheka* and *Pratimanataka* and Sakthibhadra's *Ascharyachoodamani.* Kunchan Nampiar has written eight *thullals* (tales in verse for performance) based on different episodes in the Ramayana. The epic has also been adapted for *Tholppavakkoothu*, shadow-plays performed in Kali temples in Palghat district using leather puppets. Sanskrit texts by Dingnaga, Ramabhadra Deekshitar, Bhavabhuti, Bhasa, Murari, and Sakthibhadra have also found excellent translators in Malayalam. There is also an abundance of independent plays based on the Ramayana like *Seethaswayamvaram* (Kodungallur Kunjukkuttan Thampuram) *Mandodari* (Sardar K. M. Paniker), *Adhbhuta Ramayanam* (M. Neelakantan Moose), *Seethaharanam* (N. Sankaran Nair), *Bhasha Ramayanam* (A. Govindappila Chattambi), *Ravanaputran* by Pallathu Raman, and the more recent *Lankam Ravana Palitam* by Madassery Madhava Variyar, *Ramarajabhishekam* by E. V. Krishna Pillai, *Pushpavrishti* by Thikkodiyan, and the Ramayana trilogy by C. N. Sreekantan Nair (*Kanchana Sita*, *Saketham*, and *Lankalakshmi*).

There are several folk versions of the Ramayana story as well. *Patalaramayanam* is one such example. Patalaravana, the demon lord of the nether world wants to help his friend Ravana of Lanka when he was fighting his losing battle; so he abducts Rama and Lakshmana

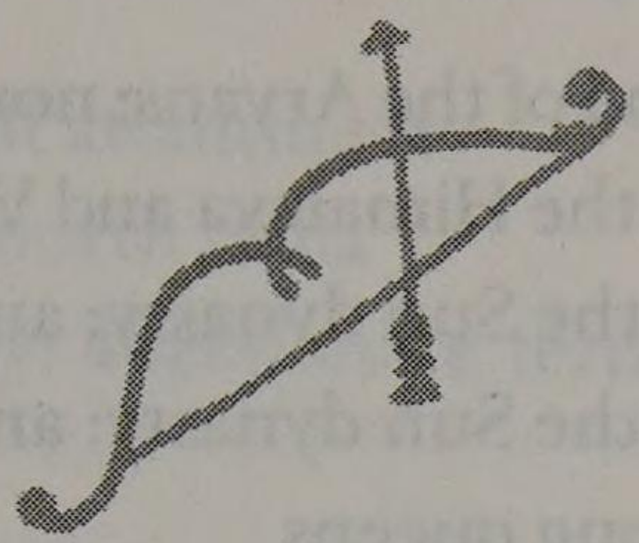
to the nether world. Hanuman comes to know of this and after a series of adventures and some romantic episodes kills the abductor and rescues his masters who continue their battle against Ravana. The *Kilippattu* based on this story was probably composed in the eighteenth century. *Seethadukham* (Sita's Sorrow) is also of the same period. Here, after Rama's return to Ayodhya, the three mothers-in-law ask Sita to paint a picture of Ravana who they had never seen. She reluctantly complies. The mothers-in-law, jealous of the favours Sita received from her fond husband, bring this picture to Rama's notice to arouse his suspicion. Rama asks Lakshmana to take Sita to the forest and kill her. Lakshmana, unable to murder Sita, places her in the care of an ascetic, kills a salamander, and shows his blood-drenched sword to Rama. This convinces Rama, but not the women who knew it was a beast's blood. Lakshmana is sent back to the woods, who cuts Sita's little finger and brings that blood to the palace. This time the women say it is a man's blood. Lakshmana irked by their remark asks them to cut their own limbs and see if that blood matched this. The women are now silenced. Rama, however, is overcome with remorse at the truth and goes to the hermitage to see his sons. Sita then disappears into a chasm. Rama tries to pull her back but only gets a single strand of her hair.

R. S. Varmaji, a Malayalam scholar, has listed 197 important independent works based on the Ramayana in Malayalam, nineteen translations, and twenty-four works of prose. There are also several representations of the Ramayana in Kerala's painting, sculpture, and poetry. The mural paintings of Tripunithura palace depict Rama's story from his birth up to his triumphal return from exile. The Rama temples at Triprayar and Tiruvilvamala have selected episodes from the epic sculpted in wood around the sanctum sanctorum. The entire Ramayana story is carved on forty wooden panels in the Padmanabhapuram palace. Raja Ravi Varma too has paintings based on Ramayana.

The most significant among the poems based on Ramayana is

perhaps Kumaran Asan's *Chintavishtayaya Sita* (A Thoughtful Sita) where the abandoned Sita interrogates the whole value system that led to her tragedy and directly accuses Rama of cowardice and cruelty. The Malayalee mind has never pardoned Rama for this uncharitable act. It is impossible to list all the poems based on the episodes from Ramayana. *Seethadevi* (P. Kunjiraman Nair), *Innathe Sandhya* (Today's Dusk, Sugatha Kumari), *Samarpanam* (Dedication, Punaloor Balan), *Thamasakananangalil* (In the Woods of Tamasa, Pala Narayanan Nair), *Lakshmanan* (Vishnunarayan Namboodiri), *Vibhishanan* (Balamani Amma), *Ravanaputri* (Vayalar Ramavarma), *Ahalya, Janakee Poroo* (K. Satchidanandan), and *Sabari* (Ayyappa Paniker) are some of them. Many of these poems assume radical stances reading Rama's story from the points of view of Sita, Ravana, Sabari, and Urmila. Aravindan's film *Kanchana Sita* based on C. N. Sreekantan Nair's play of the same name depicts Rama as a tribal, foregrounds Urmila and Sambooka, represents Sita as nature, and subverts the legend from the aesthetic as well as moral points of view.

K. SATCHIDANANDAN



Glossary
Kanchana Sita

The verse that appears before the play is considered to be the first ever composed in Indian literature, recited by Valmiki, the poet who composed the earliest Ramayana. Valmiki himself was a brigand. Later, he did *tapas*[1], was covered by an anthill (*valmeekam*), from which he emerged to be known as Valmiki. As he was wandering in the forest, he saw a *krauncha*[2] bird killed by the arrow of a hunter and its mate lingering by its side, mourning its death. A grief-stricken Valmiki cursed the hunter. The curse shaped itself into this poem of pain.

Act I

1. *tapas:* penance
2. *krauncha:* imaginary Indian lovebird.
3. *mangalya-sutram:* special sanctified locket worn by Hindu women signifying marriage, removed only at the death of the husband.
4. *Panchavati:* an imaginary place in Dandaka forest where Sriraman and Sita stayed during Sriraman's exile.
5. *kadambu:* a flowering tree with fragrant flowers
6. *Raghuvamsam:* the clan of Raghu, one of the ancestors of Sriraman.

7. *Aryavartham:* the land of the Aryans; north India (ancient India); the land between the Himalaya and Vindhya mountains.
8. *Ikshwaku:* a king of the Sun dynasty; an ancestor of Sriraman.
9. *Dileepan:* a king of the Sun dynasty; an ancestor of Sriraman.
10. *maharani:* chief among queens
11. *Suryavamsam:* the Sun dynasty
12. *Kosalam:* another name for Ayodhya
13. *Saketam:* another name for Ayodhya
14. *Aryaputran:* son of Aryans. A term of endearment used by women in addressing their husbands.
15. *rajamathavu:* queen mother
16. *maharshi:* sage
17. *dasyu:* demon or barbarian
18. *rajarshi:* a king who did penance and attained sagehood, such as Viswamitran.
19. *kusa:* a species of white sacrificial grass
20. *kulaguru:* adviser to a clan
21. *Aswamedham:* horse sacrifice performed by kings to prove their sovereignty over other kings and chieftains. A horse is sent around, followed by an army. If the horse is seized by any king or chieftain, he has to fight the accompanying army to prove his superiority.
22. *yajamanan:* overlord. Here the term is used to denote the performer of the sacrifice.
23. *worship with water:* water offering by brahmins to various deities. A form of worship held twice a day after bathing.
24. *paduka:* sandals
25. *anthapuram:* women's section in a palace
26. *yagasala:* sanctified chamber for performing sacrificial prayers

Act II

1. *venchamaram:* fan made from the fur of the tail of a white deer
2. *Prasravanam:* a mountain in Sugreeva's kingdom

3. *moksham:* release; self attainment
4. *Videham:* a state in north India
5. *kumaran:* young boy; affectionate term used in addressing a younger brother.
6. *Simsapa:* a kind of tree
7. *Chitrakootam:* a mountain peak in modern Bundelkhand; a holy place where Sage Valmiki performed his penance and Sriraman visited him during his exile.
8. *rajadharmam:* code of conduct prescribed for a king
9. *atiyan:* a term of acknowledgement used by subordinates when talking to their overlords.
10. *unni:* a young boy; a term used to address sons or younger brothers.
11. *yagam:* sacrifice
12. *Gandhara:* an ancient country in north India corresponding to modern Khandahar.
13. *manthra:* sacred verses recited in connection with rituals
14. *Brahmagnanam:* knowledge of the universal truth
15. *adharmam:* that which is contrary to dharmam or accepted code of conduct

Act III

1. *gurunathan:* teacher
2. *mandara:* a type of flower, either white or purple
3. *Nikumbhila:* the secret and inviolate chamber of Ravanan and Indrajith where they offered worship to Siva
4. *Tataka:* a demoness whom Sriraman killed
5. *Parasuraman:* one of the incarnations of Lord Vishnu; supposed to have reclaimed Kerala from the ocean.
6. *karma:* destiny or fate; act or action; one of the three paths for attaining realization (the other two being bhakti and *gnana*).
7. *dark phase of the moon:* the fourteen days when the moon wanes and disappears

Act IV

1. *Tara and Mandodari:* Tara, wife of Bali the monkey king; Mandodari, wife of Ravanan, the demon King. Both Bali and Ravanan were killed by Sriraman.
2. *Gandharvas:* semi-divine beings who are great singers
3. *apsara:* semi-divine beings; women dancers
4. *tirumeni:* means auspicious body; a term used by subordinates when addressing a leader.
5. *Kailasam:* a mountain peak in the Himalayas; the abode of Lord Sivan
6. *rakshasa:* demon
7. *Son of Anjana:* Hanuman
8. *Rahu:* one of the nine planets that brings about a solar eclipse
9. *Rishyamookam:* a mountain in Sugreevan's kingdom where Hanuman first met Sriraman
10. *darshan:* a glimpse of anything holy
11. *champaka, ketaka:* fragrant flowers
12. *devatharam:* a forest tree
13. *neerkadambu:* a forest tree
14. *Durvasavu:* a sage, noted for his short temper

Glossary
Ramayana Stories

Black Holes

1. *Maveli's land:* Maveli is the abbreviated form of the word 'Mahabali', a legendary ruler of Kerala. He was vanquished and sent to the netherworld by 'Vamana', the dwarf avatar of Lord Vishnu. Maveli's rule was considered to be an idyllic one when the land flourished and there was no theft, robbery, or violence.
2. *attuvanchi:* flower of a water plant, a kind of lotus
3. *swords:* sons raising their axes to kill mothers at the orders of the fathers is a reference to Parasuraman killing his mother when ordered by his father Jamadagni, who suspected her chastity. When a pleased Jamadagni asked his son what he wanted as a boon; Parasuraman asked that his mother be brought back to life.
4. *satwa:* the noblest of the three divine attributes or *gunas* (qualities) of which we are made, the other two being *rajas* and *tamas.*
5. *Raghuvamsam:* the clan of Raghu, one of Sriraman's ancestors.
6. *Kekayam:* the kingdom ruled by Aswapathi, father of Kaikayi (second wife of King Dasaratha).

7. *Dileepan and Sudakshina:* a famous king of the Sun dynasty and his queen; an ancestor of Sriraman.
8. *Saketam:* another name for Ayodhya, the capital city of Sriraman
9. *vethalam:* an evil spirit haunting cemeteries; a genie, ghost, or demon. A famous reference to the vethalam is in the story about Vikramaditya, the Mauryan ruler.

Asoka

1. *simsapa:* a tree, the scientific name of which is *Dalbergia.*
2. *karuka:* a species of fodder grass, used in rituals.

Mother Clan

1. *Soorpanakha:* sister of Ravana; thus named because she had nails as wide as a winnowing sieve.
2. *Karimkali:* a form of the Mother Goddess, Kali, in which she is envisaged as being dark-skinned; goddess of the lower castes.
3. *Maya:* a famous sculptor who belonged to the Rakshasa (demon) clan
4. *arali:* white flowers used in the worship of Siva and Kali; oleander (*Nerium*)
5. *champaka:* an offwhite flower with a heady fragrance (*Michelia*)
6. *Panchavati:* an imaginary place in the Dandaka forest on the banks of the Godavari river where Sriraman and Sita stayed during their exile.
7. *neerkadambu:* a tree found in forests
8. *swastika:* a mystical symbol denoting good luck and prosperity; the cross in the centre stands for the four directions. The swastika symbol is supposed to capture auspicious energies from all directions.
9. *vaka:* a tree; its bark is dried and powdered and used as a soap
10. *The sins of time:* according to Hindu beliefs there are two types of sins—*Karmadosham* (the sins emanating from one's own deeds)

and *Kaladosham* (the sins emanating from bad times). The sins of time refers to Kaladosham.

What is not in the Story

1. *ilanji:* white flower
2. *Naimisaranyam:* a place where Sriraman held the Aswamedhayagam
3. *thatha:* a formal way of addressing the father by the son.
4. *appam:* a sweetmeat made of rice powder and jaggery
5. *akka:* sister
6. *appa:* father
7. *gnani:* a realized soul
8. *yugadharma:* the duties to be performed or discharged in each age

Jathiguptan and Janakiguptan

1. *Why weapons ... penance:* poem taken from Valmiki's Ramayan. Citing the peaceful forest, Sita questions Sriraman on the need for being so heavily armed.
2. *Kaliyuga:* the last of the four ages into which time is divided, according to Hindu belief. The other three yugas are *Krita*, *Treta*, and *Dwapara*. Kali is the time of moral degradation and conflict.
3. *marotti:* a tree whose fruits yield a kind of high fatty oil used in lamps
4. *Gandeevam:* the bow given to Arjuna after severe penance by Agni (the Fire God)
5. *Burning of the forest:* refers to the burning of the Khandava forest by Arjuna in the Mahabharata
6. *gada:* a mace
7. *lungi:* coloured and patterned cloth worn by working-class people and wrapped around the waist.

Cont'd from front flap

This volume looks at the exemplary ethical deity, Rama, from a woman's point of view. Immensely readable, it will be of interest to students and general readers of South Asian literature, literature in translation, and gender studies.

C. N. Sreekantan Nair (1928-76), one of Kerala's most famous playwrights, experimented successfully with stage direction and concepts of theatre, wrote short stories, and edited literary journals.

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Cover illustration: Sita Bhumipravesh, painting by Raja Ravi Varma, from the Royal Gaekwad collection of Baroda. Image: courtesy Parsram Mangharam.

C.N. Sreekantan Nair's award-winning play, ***Kanchana Sita***, is the first of three plays of a dramatic trilogy based on the Ramayana. It is a questioning of Rama's dharma from diverse, yet converging, points of view. It is also about the tragedy of power, the search for which only leads to solitude and destruction. Nair looks deep into the [illegible] love and violence [illegible] to

Sarah Joseph's [illegible] of the Ramayana in w[illegible] and peace, and th[illegible], which is the central theme of the epic.

9780195666236
12/19/2019 13:28-2
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OXFORD
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ISBN 019566623-2
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Rs 250